THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

CAMEO

JANUARY
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FEATURING TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

PERIL IN THE SHADOWS

WHEN SHE INHERITED THE OLD CORNWALL MANOR, JAN NEVER IMAGINED SHE WOULD NEED PROTECTION FROM DANGER—AND LOVE

EMMA

SUDDENLY RICH, BUT SURROUNDED BY TREACHERY—COULD EMMA TRUST THE ONE MAN WHO CLAIMED TO LOVE HER?

PLUS SHORT STORIES AND FEATURES INCLUDING

A HERONE IN HISTORY: DOLLEY!

AND

PRISONER OF THE KEEP

FICTION BY:
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CAMEO
THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

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A Letter from the Editor

"For auld lang syne, my dear
For auld lang syne
We'll take a cup o' kindness yet
For auld lang syne"

Dear Reader,
The man who gave us those words made this observation about himself: "It was only after I fell in love that I could begin to write poetry and appreciate music."

God bless Robert Burns for his love of friendship, song and poetry. He gave us an immortal way to remember the best of the years gone by while welcoming in the new and its untried horizons.

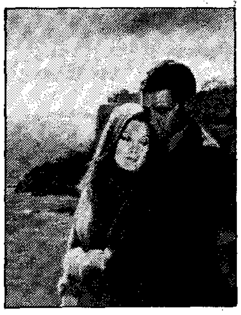
And so, in a spirit of starting anew, we make a million New Year's resolutions, from learning French and Italian, to how to play the violin, to learning the latest dance. Fortunately, by the time April winds come into play, our resolutions are long forgotten, and most of us hear only a faint whisper of remorse.

There is one resolution it's safe to bet that anybody reading this magazine has never made: to read a prescribed amount every day. A reader spends every minute he can spare reading, and never stops craving more. Why should he when the next chapter may introduce him to a new exotic land, an unforgettable character, a moving love story. For 1981, CAMEO promises you a wealth of novels, short stories, and features, and we wish you a happy New Year with plenty of time for your favorite diversion.

Happy Reading,

Manon Tingue

Manon Tingue
Editor



Cover Illustration by
Franco Accornero

Adam Dexter and Jan Reynolds in a tender embrace at Chapters, her Cornwall estate. From the novel . . . *Peril In the Shadows.*

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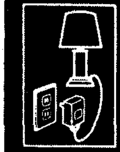
MAYBE IT'S TIME TO TAKE SOME OF THE CONTROL OUT OF HIS HANDS.



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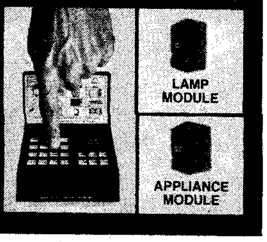
LAMP MODULE
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Equation of the Wind

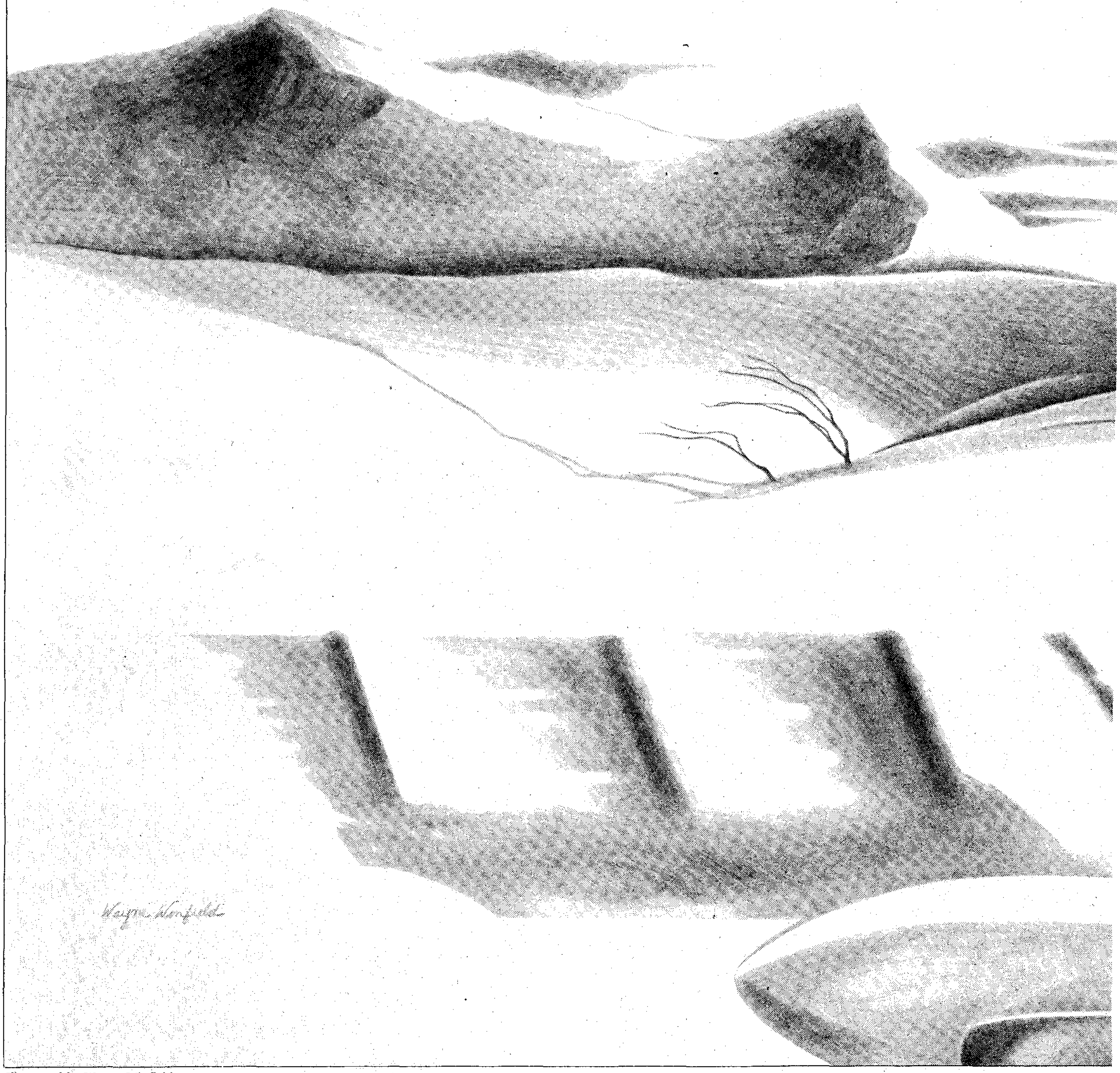
Did she exist or did the accident cause this vision of a flaming haired beauty?

The XKE roared through the evening. It screeched around the curve of the road, smashed through a railing, clattered across a bridge, dropped with a splash and settled.

"You there, young fella!" came a cry from the bank.

Robert Bruce looked up, dazed. He shook his head, passed an arm through the thin air of the front seat, unbuckled his safety belt and leaped over the side into

A short story by Pauline C. Smith



Illustrated by Wayne Winfield

water up to his ankles.

He sloshed through the gravel bed around the car and moaned.

"You hurt?" yelled the rancher from the bank.

Robert Bruce looked up blankly, then peered into the car at the empty shadow of the passenger seat. He picked up the seat belt, still buckled in a 22-inch circlet, and groaned.

"Need some help? Can you walk?" shouted the rancher on the bank.

Robert Bruce looked up and focused at last. "There was a girl," he cried. "I've got to find the girl."

The sky darkened, the first star flickered. A breeze sang through the trees. Bruce waded around the car again. "I can't find the girl who was with me," he moaned.

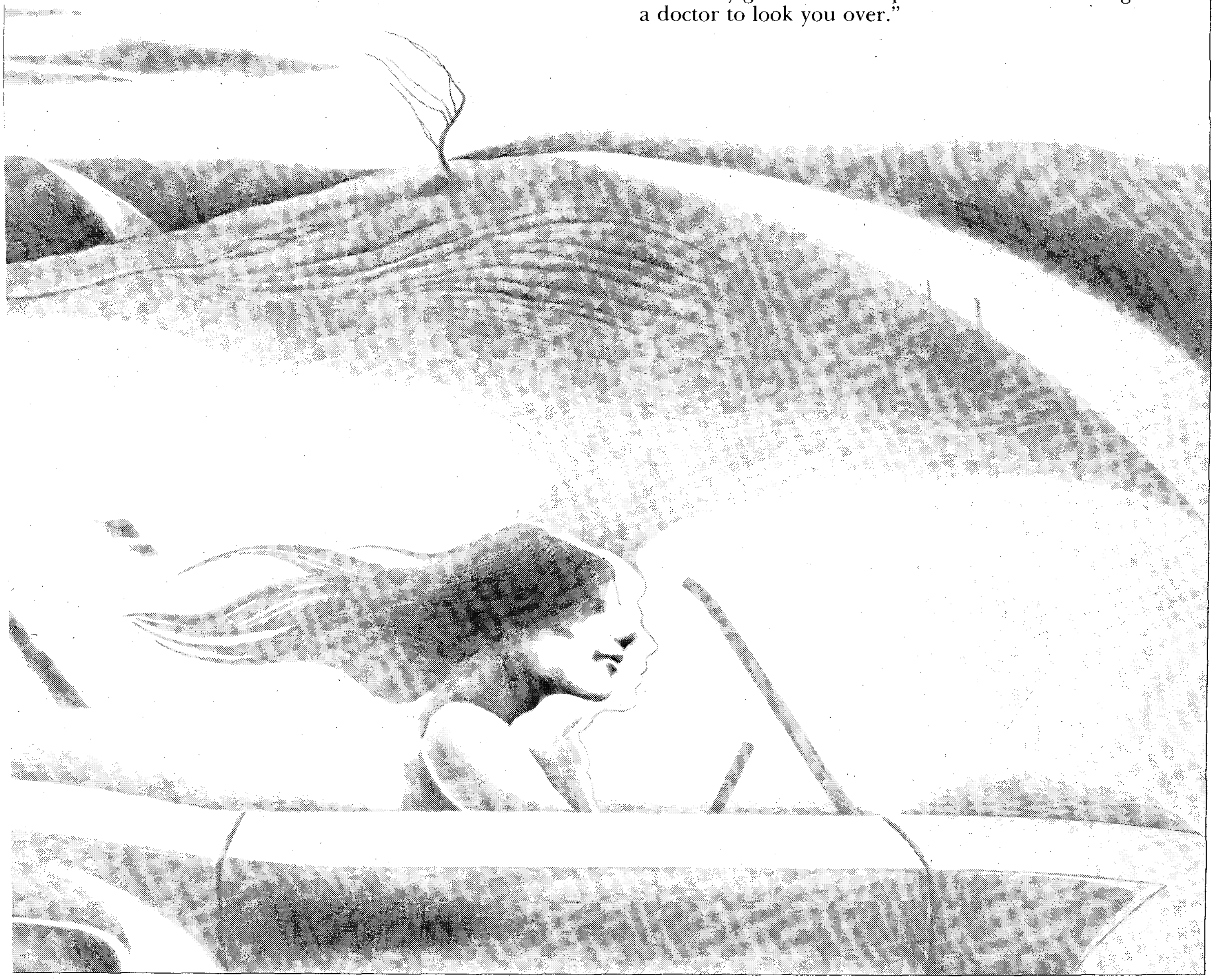
The rancher rolled up the legs of his jeans. He slid down the bank of gravel and mud. He splashed into the water and grabbed Bruce's arm. "There wasn't any girl," he said. "Hey, there wasn't any girl." He urged Bruce up the bank. "You got banged on the head, boy. You didn't have a girl with you." Stamping his feet on the grass, he leaned over and rolled down the legs of his jeans. Then he looked up suspiciously and straightened. "You drunk?" he asked.

Politely, Robert Bruce blew his breath in the rancher's face.

"High on pot?" questioned the rancher.

Robert Bruce shook his head. "There was a girl," and he started down the bank again.

The rancher yanked him back. "I saw you, boy, from up on that field, drivin' like crazy, missin' the turn. There was still enough light to see and there wasn't any girl. Come on up to the house and we'll get a doctor to look you over."



Because the rancher was larger than he and far stronger, and held both his shoulders firmly, Robert Bruce went along with him, looking back at the dark stream and the darker shadow of the car.

Wind roared in the tree tops. Fog wisps frolicked a ghostly fandango. "Don't worry, young fellow. We'll get your car towed out."

Robert Bruce was not worried about the car. He jerked and was held fast. "You want the girl to die out there in the fog and the wind?" he cried.

"Nobody ever died in fog or wind. Nobody ever died when there wasn't anyone to die."

An hour later, the doctor diagnosed Robert Bruce's condition as excellent. No cuts, no concussions. "Went off that little bridge, huh?" he said. "Well, that's not much of a drop, but you were lucky. Could've gotten a bruise or two—maybe a whiplash." He packed his bag.

"You say he didn't hit his head?" asked the rancher, surprised.

"Nope," said the doctor. "Didn't even break a fingernail."

Robert Bruce felt a moment's triumph as he tucked in the shirt and hitched up the jeans the rancher had loaned him. "I had this girl in my car," he began once more. "I saw the bridge just before we crashed. I grabbed for her."

"Seems to me you should've grabbed for the steering wheel," was the doctor's diagnosis as he put on his hat and picked up his bag.

"There wasn't any girl," insisted the rancher. "I was standing in that field there, up on the rise, not more'n ninety feet away. I could look right down in the car. Still light. I'd've seen a girl if there'd been one. No top on the car." He turned to the doctor. "Sure he didn't get knocked on the head?"

"Positive."

"Well, I'm positive there wasn't any girl, either."

The tow truck and crew arrived shortly afterward. Robert Bruce and the rancher and a half dozen neighbors watched in the glare of the floodlight from the bank. The car sat out in the middle of the stream without a dent on it. Men in boots crouched in the shallow water, rigging the tow chain.

"I want the river dragged." Robert Bruce tapped a neighbor's shoulder. "Is there any equipment around here? I'll pay to have the river dragged."

The man looked at him blankly. "'T'ain't a river. It's a creek. Not more'n six inches of water in there now, left from the winter rains. Mostly it's just a dry creek bed."

"He thinks there was a girl in his car," offered the rancher. "He thinks she's in the water."

"He does?"

"If I want the river dragged," argued Robert Bruce, "I will, by God, have it dragged. And I'll get a search party to comb the woods, too."

"'T'ain't a river," he was told again. "If there was anything in the six inches of water out there, it'd stick up like a sore thumb. Ain't any woods around here either. Only a citrus grove or two."

The tow truck roared over the bank as it sucked the car from the mud and gravel. The onlookers watched with interest.

"Well," said the rancher with finality, "I say he didn't have a girl with him, and I was watching from the field."

"Maybe he remembers from another time," someone suggested. "That could happen. Anyway, you can see clear down to the bottom of the creek. If there was a girl there, you'd see her plain as day."

They turned their attention to the car being dragged up and out of the water, over the shoulder, bright and shining, with only the white sidewalls patterned with mud.

"Maybe she was frightened and took off the minute we hit the water." Robert Bruce grabbed the rancher's shoulder; then he remembered the buckled circle safety belt, and let go.

Folding their arms, the onlookers observed him momentarily before turning back to the car.

The car rolled nicely across the grass, leaving its tire imprint up the bank. There was nothing in the water. Nothing at all except pebbles and mud.

Experimentally, Robert Bruce ran an inquiring hand over his mathematical head and he could still see the figure in it. . . . "I had a girl with me," he declared with emphasis. "We went over the bridge together."

They all surveyed him with abstract interest. Then they moved away to make a circle around the car.

"Don't see how anyone could break through that railing and land in the creek bed without a scratch. . . ." They turned to study him, then walked contemplatively around the car, shaking their heads.

◆

Love is the blossom where there blows
Every thing that lives or grows.

Giles Flecther
Christ's Victory

One of the wrecking crew opened up the hood to peer inside, his glance disapproving. He clanged the hood. Slipping into the driver's seat, he pressed the starter. The motor hummed. "Sounds all right," he admitted. Then hopefully, "I can take her in, though, and clean her up."

Robert Bruce waved the car away.

"I'll bring her back bright and early in the morning."

Robert Bruce shrugged.

The floodlight was on a telescopic pole. The tow crew took that down to leave the banks and the stream bed dim in the light of the moon. The sightseers wandered off. Still gazing moodily out over the shallow water, Robert Bruce stood alone with the rancher.

He could remember just as well how it was . . . *the setting sun a Beltane fire, the screaming gull a bagpipe tune, the fog a glistening curtain* . . . and there she was, by the side of the road. "She was standing there," explained Bruce. "I almost missed her. I had to back up in the fog—"

"A pickup, huh?" said the rancher.

Robert Bruce was outraged. . . . *Her hair was red as pail-rust, her laugh bell-like, her chin clefted with the cavern of a dimple*. . . . "She was like a wraith in the fog."

"That she was," agreed the rancher.

"Look!" Bruce clutched the rancher's arm. "Believe me, this isn't my imagination. I am the factual type, a statistician, mathematician, an electronics engineer. I don't see ghosts on the road."

Gently, the rancher plucked off his hand. "Sure," he soothed, "sure, I know. Let's go on up to the house now and get a good night's sleep." He urged him along. "In the morning, Lew'll have your car back. By the way," he added, "where were you headed for?"

"Holy mackerel!" breathed Robert Bruce, remembering belatedly that he had been headed for an engagement party. His.

"Forget something, young fellow?" asked the rancher.

"Holy mackerel!"

"There's a phone up at the house, you know."

When he finally got through to Sylvia, her voice was icy with control.

Her "yes, Robert, what held you up?" was packed with significance.

"I drove off a bridge," he explained lamely.

"A bridge!" Her laugh was as cold as chilled methanol. "There is no bridge, Robert, on the highway from there to here."

"I hit a traffic jam. I turned on this side road . . ."

She answered with silence.

"I was in a hurry to get to our engagement party."

"Then you went off a bridge," she prompted.

"I didn't see it until it was too late. I was driving fast."

"You were probably thinking up a formula," she crisply observed. "You need a keeper, Robert. I shall pick you up in the morning."

He thought of daylight and a search for the girl. "But I'll have my car. I'll –"

"Don't come to me. I will come to you."

Robert Bruce cradled the phone and turned. The rancher watched him from an easy chair. "Mad, huh?"

He nodded.

The rancher yawned and stood. "Females are like that. They want things the way they've planned 'em out. I almost got married once. But she didn't like ranching. Couldn't stand too much fresh air at a time. Didn't like the smell of cows and horses. Couldn't even stand orange blossoms while they were still on the trees. Wanted me to bend my knees under a flat-topped executive desk. We worked it out all right, though. She married a fellow that fit under the desk and I stayed out here on the ranch." He stretched. "Any time you want to go to bed, you know where it is."

Robert Bruce lay on the bed remembering his girl of the evening. He remembered the side road that dipped from the highway, a road laced with leaves and veiled with fog, where the eucalyptus peeled its bark against the shadow of the brush, and the chatter of crickets filled the air. Perhaps it had been the sunset, the shadows and murmurs there that now recalled to him his great-aunt Mary and her long-ago words.

She had been the fey one, the one who had predicted: *Ye're a lad wi' numbers for a brain and a goose egg for a heart. Ye'll need my help to pick a proper wife.* . . . Perhaps it was this trip and his soon-to-be marriage that now reminded him of Aunt Mary's soft burr. . . . *A bonnie lass ye need to keep her wee nose in the bright kitchen kettles and out of yere man's work.*

. . . And in the misty sunset he had seen the girl.

Night fog drifted through the open window to lay cold fingers on his brow while he remembered the sunset and the shadows and the girl. Half-bold she was, half-shy, with pail-rust hair and the cavern of a dimple. "Drive fast," she had trilled, "through the wind, to hear its song and smell the grass and crash the bridge . . ."

Such talk! he had thought and slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

The brush became a blur, the trees a veil of green. The wind fanned flaming banner hair. She clutched his arm. Hs twisted the wheel . . . and then she was gone, leaving the safety belt an empty circlet.

The cold fog blew through the window and dried Robert Bruce's brow.

There *had* been a girl!

It was while he was still at the breakfast table the next morning that he heard the sound of Sylvia's car. Not that the motor was loud, simply that it was so powerful it vibrated the air waves and brought him to his feet as sharply as Sylvia's terse and frequent recommendations. He held the door wide and looked out upon her.

"Well, Robert." With an economy of motion but still gracefully, she snapped open the car door, swung out and clicked it behind her. "You don't look as if you suffered from your accident." She glanced down at the broken bridge rail and back at him. "Perhaps a little tired, but so am I. Guests last evening, you know, an engagement party planned and then excuses to be made . . ."

He murmured an apology and stood aside as she swept past him into the house. "But then, that's all water under the bridge." She smiled thinly. "Naturally I had to arrange another party immediately and I wanted to be sure you made it in time. That is why I came."

As the rancher slouched in to lean against the wall, coffee cup in hand, she glanced at him for an indifferent moment. "When do you expect your car, Robert?"

"Oh, any minute. Any minute now." He murmured an introduction. "You really didn't need to come all this way."

Smiling remotely, she corrected him. "I thought it necessary." She sat down and arranged her handbag on her crisp linen lap. "Father has asked some very important people. You'll be introduced, you know, not only as his future son-in-law but as his new executive."

Robert Bruce loosened his collar and the rancher thoughtfully sipped his coffee.

"Robert, you did quit your job, didn't you?"

"Well, not exactly." He ran his hands along his dry but wrinkled slacks. "We were in the middle of a problem."

"You are always in the middle of a problem, Robert."

"But I like problems."

"When you come with Father, other people will take care of the problems. Now, Robert—"

"Ma'am." The rancher cleared his throat.

Sylvia turned to him.

"I suppose you saw the bridge when you drove up. Some crash, wasn't it?" Pleasantly, he returned to his coffee.

"Robert gets his head on figures," she stated.

"Yes, ma'am, I guess he does at that." Teetering the cup, the rancher watched her thoughtfully. "There was a girl in the car with him. That's what he says, anyway."

Sylvia stiffened, and Robert quickly denied it. "There wasn't one, really. *He* says there wasn't a girl and he was standing in the field that looks down over the road. *He says absolutely there was no girl in the car.*" With the solid emphasis of his words, Robert's mind caught the frail glimpse of flame hair and remembered laughter light as the breeze.

"Well now," the rancher said, carefully setting his cup on the table. "Who can be sure with the fog coming in—after sundown? Who can be sure of anything with a car whizzin' along hell-bent for election, and a young man paying no attention to what he's doing?"

"Well!" Sylvia stood with one sharp movement. "That explains a few things." With an icy smile, she stepped to the door and flung it open.

"But, Sylvia—" Robert Bruce reached the porch just in time to see her swing the heavy car down the hill past the broken bridge.

"Now," he said to the rancher, "see what you've done."

"I see." The rancher picked up his coffee cup. "What's done is that you're out from under an executive desk and back to your problems. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Well, yes," said Robert Bruce. "I guess."

"Free to think about figures," reminded the rancher, which Robert Bruce promptly did.

"No," answered the rancher, "I still claim I didn't see the girl. Just like I told you. But she's your dream, so I wouldn't be likely to see her."

The XKE was delivered in mint condition, whitewalls sparkling, passenger seat belt laid out in two straight lines. "But it was buckled last night," argued Robert Bruce, "in a twenty-two-inch circle. I saw it. I touched it."

"Sure it was and sure you did," agreed the rancher. He stepped away from the car and wished Robert Bruce a pleasant trip back, watching the XKE rumble into action.

Just as the car passed the broken bridge, he cupped his lips and shouted, "If your dream comes true, boy, bring her here so I can see her too."

Robert Bruce raised his hand in assent as he made the turn and entered the side road laced with leaves and shining with morning sun. He drove the road slowly and searchingly, for it was somewhere along here in the fog and the sunset that he had found the girl. Here where the eucalyptus peeled and the brush was thick, looking dusty now in the daylight and harsh in the sun.

Well, she wasn't here now. But she was somewhere. All he had to do was search long enough and finally, in just the right place at just the right time, he would find her again.

He shot from the narrow road onto the highway and let the car out. Traffic was light. The wind blew, the motor hummed, and Robert Bruce slipped into his usual preoccupation of working out problems. He stretched his present and most pressing equation over the miles, without solution . . . girl, plus accident, minus girl equals an unknown quantity, the first problem he hadn't been able to solve since he had discovered the magic of long division.

The problem stimulated him into fancier and more complex equations, always with the equal sign followed by a question mark, distracting his interest from ordinary engineering computations so that, at his office desk, his page of figures covering a projected high-temp cabinet for proposed governmental use might include not only the "k" factor of 0.13 Btus/hr and its phase relationship to practicable insulation, but also the unsolvable and unprovable and ever-recurring equation of girl/accident/gone girl, to equal a problem such as Robert Bruce had never before faced.

He spent his days mixing his professional and personal puzzles on his office work sheet, and his evenings and weekends searching out byroads, valley paths and mountain lanes—at sunset, by moonlight and in the fog. He pursued russet-haired girls on crowded streets. A heavy-headed rose in the shadows caused him to start.

Then he and his engineering staff found themselves in the midst of a big job that called for so much overtime work he had no more evenings or weekends to himself. So he added stick-figure arms and legs to phase symbols on his formulae and topped the circle with red-inked hair.

A young project engineer who looked up to him as a genius caught him at it and hunched his shoulders with mirth. Straightening his face and clicking his heels, he said, "Sir," with his usual deference and asked, "How is humidification to be accomplished on the project at hand?"

He then added, "I have a red-haired sister if you'd like to come around to the house tonight for coffee and some of her cake."

"By means of an external vapor injection system, controlled by the wet bulb potentiometer," answered Robert Bruce, adding two red pigtails to the circle of the phase symbol. "I will be happy to come around for coffee and some of your kid sister's cake."

That was all it was to be, coffee with an admiring co-worker, served by a carrot-haired sister.

That was all it was to be until the sister came to the door to let them in.

She smiled and the dimple was a cavern. She tipped her head so that pail-rust hair veiled her shoulders.

Robert Bruce closed his eyes. When he snapped them open, she was still there.

"Come in," invited the project engineer.

But there he would lose her again, for first he had to find her in the fog and mist, among the shadows, to the sound of the cricket and the sigh of the wind. He bent forward and found himself moving his lips without sound. When the words finally came forth, they were passionate and breathless. "What happened to you that night on the bridge?"

Startled, she stepped back.

Her brother's face went blank.

"I looked in the water and in the bushes. On the paths, by the roads. Behind the trees . . ."

Puzzled, she studied his face and turned her eyes toward her brother.

He shrugged and raised his brows. "Look, fella . . ." he attempted.

"I have dreamed of you and thought of you. I was afraid I would never find you."

Her eyes turned velvet and her brother wedged himself between the two. "Look, fella—"

Robert Bruce craned his neck to speak over the opposing shoulder. "You are all I ever wanted, all that I've waited for . . ."

She took a step toward him.

Her brother barred the way. "Look, fella—"

"Come with me. Let me show you the road and the bridge and the rancher who said you were a dream."

She pushed her brother's arm aside.

"No," he protested. "He draws red hair on the circles of the phase symbols! . . ."

She then looked at her brother as if she were sure he was insane and stepped to Robert Bruce's side.

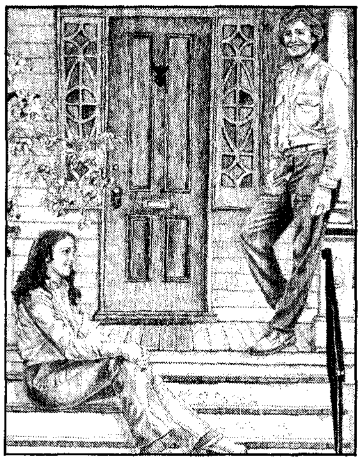
They raced to the curb and leaped into the car.

He leaned over and drew the safety belt around her, buckling it into a 22-inch circle, rumbled the car into life and streaked from the city onto the highway, toward the road where the eucalyptus peeled and the crickets' humming filled the air.

The wind was a banner of flame, the sound of the tires a soft Scottish burr.

Robert Bruce reached for her hand and held it in his, for this was the girl and that was the night, and Aunt Mary had picked him a proper wife. ❧

The House on Hanover Hill



The house was part of a cherished past. How could she learn to face an uncertain future?

It came out almost without my knowing it: the one thing in the world that I hadn't intended to say. I stood, torn between relief that it was out and irritation that I hadn't been able to hold my tongue.

"I used to live here."

Ray turned, astonishment in his face.

"You what? You're joking!"

Number Twenty-Seven, old-fashioned, a little gloomy, loomed above us. I remembered every brick. My lovely, lovely house.

"No, I'm not." To my surprise my voice was steady; my heart was doing such strange things in my throat that I was amazed I could speak at all. "When I was little. Before Dad died. Didn't you know? I thought I'd told you."

Liar! Of course he didn't know. And I knew very well that I hadn't told him, hadn't intended to tell him, in case he realized how single-mindedly I had been working toward this day. Weeks ago Sue, perched on a stool in a coffee bar on High Street, had nodded casually to a slight, untidy boy standing near the door and said, "That's Ray Taylor. Lives in your old house on Hanover Hill. Number Twenty-Seven, wasn't it?" And since that moment I had been working toward just one goal. Now, here I was at last, standing just inside the gate which was still overhung with the sweet-smelling roses Dad had loved so much. The flagstone path led toward the steep steps which climbed to the front door with its leaded lights and its huge, shiny brass knocker. In my pocket I crossed my fingers. Please don't let them have changed it to one of those awful doll's-house doors that we've got at home. I really used to love the colored patterns the light made through the glass.

A short story by Terry Crane

As I turned to shut the gate, the rose thorns caught in my hair. Funny, they didn't use to do that. But, then, I had grown since the last time I walked through this gate.

I could see my father, big and laughing and open-armed.

"You never told me."

"What?"

Ray laughed and tightened the arm he had put around my shoulders.

"About the house. Your living here. What a coincidence!" His quiet blue eyes were shining with pleasure. He looked very nice when he smiled. "Wait till I tell Mom. Come on."

They hadn't changed the front door; the light, rose and green, still lay in pools on the dark wood of the hall floor. Inside, except for being rather smaller than I remembered it—I used to think it was huge—the house seemed very much the same.

Ray introduced me to his mother, a wisp of a woman with the same thin, clever-looking face as her son and the same fair, untidy hair.

Ray helped himself to a plateful of fresh-baked rolls and buns.

"Guess what?" he said, through a mouthful. "Carol used to live here."

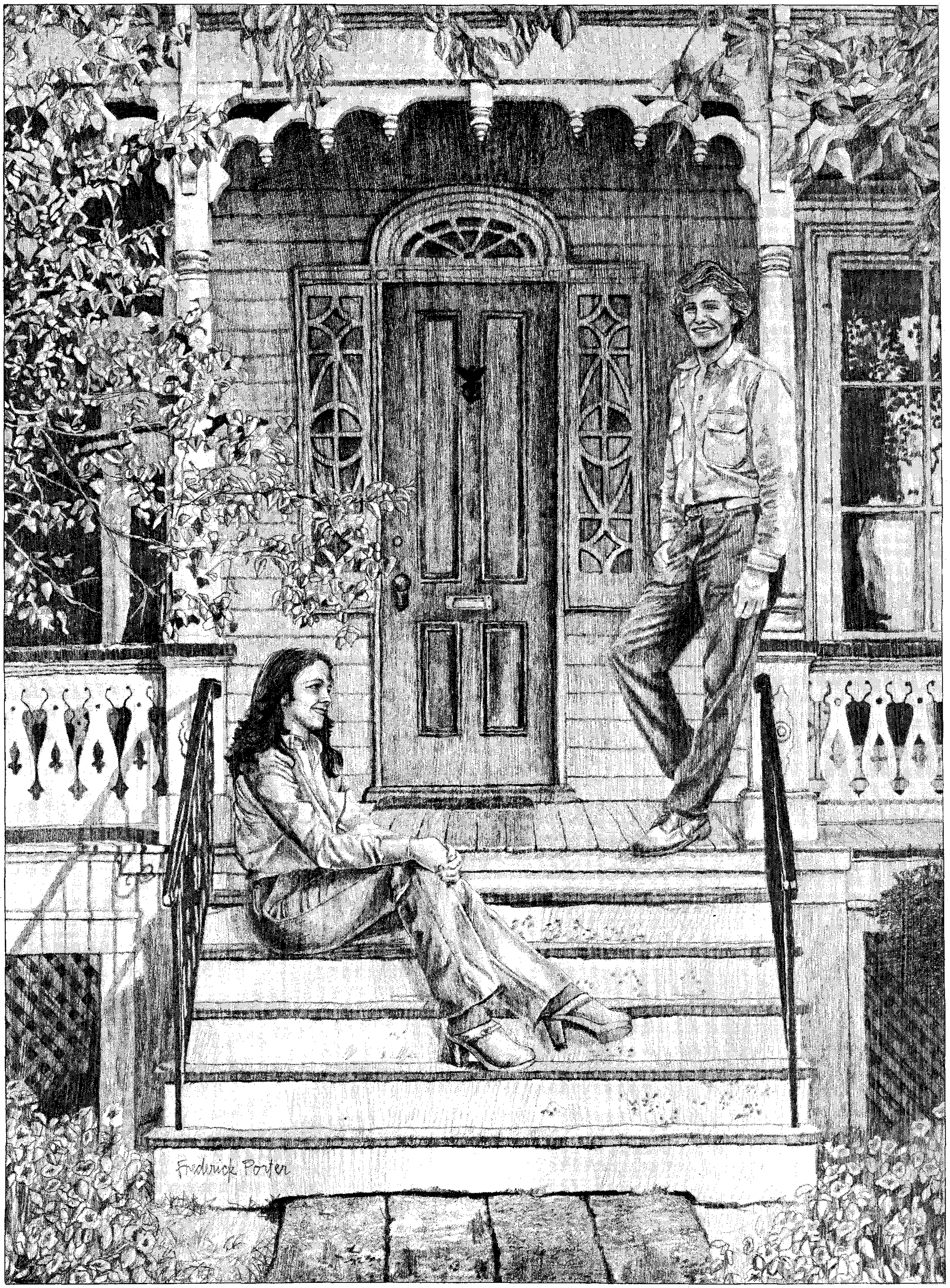
"Here? In this house?" Mrs. Taylor turned surprised eyes to me. "When was that?"

"About ten years ago. My father died when I was eight. Afterward Mom couldn't manage a house this big and this old on her own." I shrugged, as carelessly as I could manage. "Besides, the house was somehow Dad's—all the plans, the hopes, the silly schemes, the excitement—and after he died there didn't seem much point in staying."

Mrs. Taylor looked at me intently. "You liked living here?"

"I loved it." It was obviously my day for saying things I hadn't intended to say. I flushed.

Mrs. Taylor smiled sympathetically. "Then you must come here often, as often as you like. Ray, stop hogging those buns, you won't finish your tea." She appealed to me, her face a picture


Frederick Porter

Illustrated by Frederick Porter

of patient exasperation. "All these years I've spent trying to teach him some manners. I might as well have spent my time doing something more profitable. Like teaching the cat to talk. Let me take your coat. Then perhaps you'd rescue what's left of the rolls and take them into the dining room for me?" She smiled suddenly, and her blue eyes were the kindest I had ever seen. "You obviously know where it is . . . "

It was later, while we were washing dishes, that I started to talk to her. Memories had been stirring, coming to life, ever since I had walked through that front door. In her gentle, humorous way, she pulled the string that opened the bag, and out they tumbled. I talked and I talked. I spoke of things I had never been able to mention to my own mother in the face of a loss and a grief deeper than my own. Mrs. Taylor listened quietly, understood everything that I said and, I realized later, quite a lot that I did not. My father came to life in the room, and my mother—not the strained, overtired breadwinner that she became after the accident, but the Mom I remembered from those earlier years, loving and happy.

Mrs. Taylor laughed out loud at the story of Dad's hopeless attempts at "home improvements" in the bathroom.

"So, *that's* how those marks got on the ceiling." She giggled like a girl. "We've often wondered. We've never been able to get rid of them, you know." She suddenly turned to me with that same impulsive friendliness that made Ray so nice to know. "You really must come and see us often. It's obvious that you love the old place. And I can quite understand that; I love it myself. Anyway, it's about time I had a bit of moral support around here. You could be it." She laughed at my puzzled look. "I'm alone in a family of men. With two sons and a husband, I'm outnumbered three to one. You'd be doing me a favor by coming. Especially if you like gardening. You wouldn't think that I'd have to be head gardener as well as cook, housekeeper, and laundry maid, would you?"

I looked at her five-feet-nothing and laughed. "I'd love to help you. I do like gardening, and we've only got a tiny patch. And Mom had it paved over because it was easier . . . " My voice trailed away as I realized I'd sounded somehow disloyal. "And she's right, of course. I expect I'd complain like mad if I *had* to do it. But, providing Ray wouldn't mind, I'd love to come over sometimes."

Somewhere inside my head was a picture of the rambling garden with its patches of green lawn, high hedges, and gnarled old fruit trees. My swing used to hang from the apple tree in the corner.

"Ray," said his mother from the door, "wouldn't mind at all. In fact, Ray would like it very much." He came into the kitchen, smiling at both of us. He looked very happy. "I knew you two would get along." He reached out a hand, touched my hair. "Isn't she lovely?" he asked his mother, only half teasing.

His mother nodded briskly. "She's also much better at washing dishes than you are. Now, off you go kids, go and talk to Dad for a while. I'll be with you in a minute."

I saw a lot of the Taylors after that. Summer moved toward autumn; Ray and I went to discos, were invited as a couple to parties. We walked, talked, and laughed a lot. He wasn't the type to sweep a girl off her feet; he was quiet and kind and totally dependable. My friendship with his mother grew stronger. I got along very well with his father and his older brother, Eddie.

And then there was the house, Number Twenty-Seven, almost mine again—it was my right to push back the scratchy ramblers as I opened the gate, to crush between my fingers the strongly-scented lavender that grew by the back door, to run my hands over the smooth, worn wood of the bannisters, to carry a huge bunch of autumn leaves picked from the nearby woods to stand in the bay window and take the place of the fading summer flowers. Ray didn't say much, it wasn't his way, but I knew that he was happy to see me there in the house, happy that I got along with his family so well. Whether he realized just how much the house itself meant to me I didn't know, and would not think about. I was satisfied to leave things as they were. Tomorrow must take care of itself. I was happier than I had been for a long time, kinder to Mom, less impatient with my younger brother and sister, more settled at work. If it upset Mom that I now spent more time at Number Twenty-Seven than I did at home, she didn't show it. She had quite enough to do, without worrying about me.

Then in the early autumn a bombshell fell on the Taylors. Eddie was offered a job—a very good job—in Saudi Arabia.

I was there when he told his mother. She blinked, the shock showing in her eyes, then said carefully, "It seems like a very long way away."

Poor Eddie was torn. He had been offered a three-year contract helping to design a new oil installation. The money was fabulous—and it was tax free.

"It's a marvelous opportunity for me to get some capital behind me," he pointed out, "quite apart from the experience. It's only a few hours away by plane, Mom. I'll be home as often as I can."

And, of course, he went. For a while, Mrs. Taylor was quieter than usual, but gradually she got used to Eddie's absence and we settled back into our pleasant routine.

When Ray proposed to me, it seemed the most natural and easy thing in the world to say yes. We bought the ring, had a quiet family celebration, then a much noisier one with our friends. We received a very rude and very funny telegram of congratulations from Eddie, which must have cost him a fortune, and the promise of a present next time he was home. When was the wedding, he wanted to know?

Ray laughed ruefully. "That's a good question! You do realize, Carol, that it will be a couple of years, perhaps more, before we've saved enough to buy a house? You don't mind waiting?"

"Couldn't we get married and live here with your parents until we've saved enough?" Blissful thought, but I knew what he would say.

"No." He shook his head, his own brand of stubborn determination showing in every line of his face. "I'm not starting off like that. We'll have a place of our own."

"We won't move too far, though?"

He ruffled my hair absentmindedly, "Of course not."

Visions of weekends at Number Twenty-Seven, making tea, gardening, chatting around the fire. Belonging, at last. A daughter of the house.

"That's okay," I said, peacefully. "I don't mind waiting."

We had our ups and downs, of course, as anyone does. Ray could be as stubborn as a mule, and I have a temper, but most of our fights didn't last long.

Eddie wrote a lot: funny letters, full of comic incidents, peppered with jokes and Arabic lettering, disguising, I was certain though I never said so, a horrible homesickness. But there was always the money. The money made everything worth it—the boredom, the heat, the homesickness. He was making a small fortune. Half his letters were taken up with what he would do with "the loot" when he got home.

Why didn't I see it coming? I was blind.

One winter's Sunday I went to the Taylors' for lunch, as usual. Something was in the air, something I sensed but could not put my finger on. Once or twice I caught Ray's mother's eyes on me, thoughtful, sympathetic. A little worried?

After dinner, when I rose to help as I always did with the dishes, she waved me away, shaking her head.

"You go and talk to Ray, dear. Jack'll help me. Won't you, Jack? Jack!"

Ray's father jumped. "What? Oh, yes. Yes, of course."

I looked from one to the other. Talk to Ray? I had all week to talk to Ray . . . .

I smiled. "Okay. Thanks."

We went into the front room. The early winter's dusk had already filled the corners with shadows, a fire flickered warmly in the hearth. Ray dropped into a big armchair and stared thoughtfully into the flames. I perched myself on the arm of his chair and pulled his ear.

"Well?"

He looked at me.

"What's all the mystery?"

And out it came.

I stared at him. Saudia Arabia? Us? For how long? He couldn't, surely, be serious?

"Don't you see, Carol?" he pleaded, excitement in his eyes, in his voice. "We could get married now, right away. With a chance to make enough money to start ourselves off right, to set ourselves up for the rest of our lives perhaps. Eddie's fixed it, the job's there, waiting for us. With accommodations—"

I stood up, walked to the window. I felt as if he had hit me. I heard myself talking—his mother, my mother, our friends, a thousand reasons not to go, not to change things. In the dim garden beyond the window, moisture dripped from the trees onto the earth I had planted with bulbs a few months before. To steady myself I reached out and laid my hands on the windowsill, solid and strong. He saw the gesture, and when he spoke there was in his voice a bitterness I had never heard before.

"What is it, Carol? What is it that you so desperately don't want to leave? Your family? Mine? Our friends, the life we know? Or is it this blasted house? Has it always been?"

I couldn't answer. His face was tense, his jaw set. "Tell me something. The truth. Did you know, when we first met, that I lived in 'your' house?" He put an unpleasant emphasis on the word.

My voice still would not come. I nodded. No point in lying now.

"I see." His shoulders slumped a little and the anger was dying from his face. I felt so sorry for him, for myself, that I could have cried.

"And is that all it's been? Your need to get back into this house, the house you still think of as your father's? Is that it? All the promises and plans? Just an excuse?"

"No!" I was unwilling to face how much truth there might be in his words. "That isn't fair! It isn't true, it isn't!"

He turned very quickly, caught my hand. "Then prove it. Come with me. Marry *me*, not a stupid house. It'll be an adventure, a new life. Tomorrow—next week—come with me! England won't sink while we're gone, you know. We'll come back. Often. To this house—"

"To stay?" Suddenly, I did not trust the fierce look in his normally mild blue eyes. "Are you so certain of your own reasons for wanting to take this job? Is it just the money, the chance for us to get married? Or is it adventure—a strange country, a different life? Is that what you're looking for, a chance to get away? How do you know that you'll want to come back? How can you promise?"

I saw from the look on his face that my words had hit home. He looked faintly surprised. "You're right, I can't promise. I am . . . excited at the thought of a life so different, of a chance to prove what I can do on my own. But I want you with me. Believe that."

"And if I won't come?"

The words stopped him in his tracks.

For the first time I saw him really angry.

"Then I'll go without you. You'll have to choose, Carol. Me or a pile of bricks." He walked to the door, turned as he was leaving. "And the odds, I suppose, are on the bricks."

I don't really know when I decided that I couldn't let him go. When I finally gave up an obsession with a past that was dead and realized, fortunately in time, and knew that the present and the future were where my happiness lay. And that there could be no happiness without Ray.

It didn't happen all at once. For a miserable month I stubbornly stayed away from him. We studiously ignored each other in the local pub, walked, unbelievably, right past each other on High Street. I heard the news from friends eager to relay it that he had accepted the job, was leaving in a couple of months. I refused, no matter how long a detour I had to take, to go anywhere near Hanover Hill.

Then I met his mother in the supermarket. She looked tired I thought, but her eyes were still kind and she talked as if we were old friends. I went home and cried, and perhaps that was when the ice began to melt.

It was I who gave in. It had to be, didn't it? I thought about it for almost a week—panic-stricken at the idea of seeing him. In my imagination we played the scene a hundred times, with Ray's reaction ranging from icy rejection to tearful reconciliation—neither of which, knowing Ray, was very likely.

In fact, it was simpler than I had ever dared to hope. When, on the first warm and fragrant day of spring I pushed open the creaking gate, he was in the garden, weeding around my bulbs. He looked up at the sound, and when he saw me his face lit up with a smile that had me flying across the wet grass and into his arms.

The nicest thing of all happened the night before we were married. During a moment's peace in the turmoil of preparations, his mother presented me with a tiny packet, lovingly wrapped.

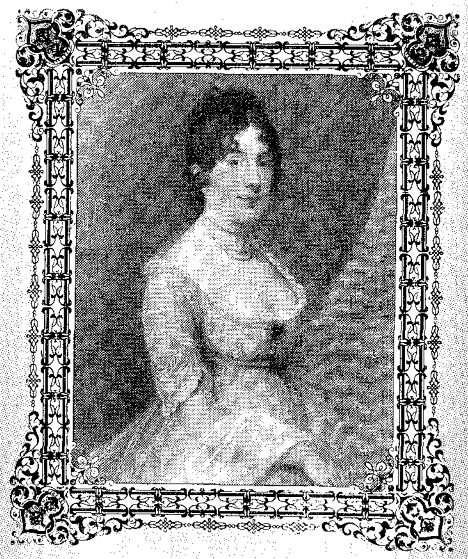
She smiled as I opened it and looked with surprise at the key that lay in the palm of my hand.

"The key," she said, "to a house that will always be your home, no matter where you are."

I didn't have to read the tag to know that it was the key to Number Twenty-Seven Hanover Hill.

A Heroine in History:

Dolley!



Brash, witty, charming–Dolley Madison was her husband's heartbeat and the idol of the nation

The golden rays of the late September sun poured through the half-open casement windows of Dorothea Todd's dressing room, speckling the walls with a dozen shades of gold and playing lightly over the mulberry satin formal dress lying across the bed.

These were the last, lazy days of warmth to be expected in Philadelphia before autumn would arrive, and it seemed almost criminal to have to prepare for a formal evening of dinner and political talk. Dorothea rose from her chair and walked to the bed and let her eyes rove over the golden glints on the deep red gown, then to the wall several feet away. Touching the cloth absentmindedly, she was lost in a fantasy of colors and shades, off into a reverie of fashion quite extraordinary for a woman of the Quaker persuasion.

Ah, but the Quaker persuasion had been her father's. Dorothea had obediently followed her father's call to his new devotion, relinquishing in the process the comfortable and gracious plantation life of eighteenth-century Virginia. And what a shame! Through some miracle, Virginia's slow and decent way of life had survived the war against England intact; true, some gentlemen farmers—What was Madison's term for them? Ah yes, "agriculturists"—some agriculturists had freed their slaves and converted their plantations into paying businesses, but still, the slow and delicious Southern way of life remained. *Except for me*, mused Dorothea.

"Dolley!"

The call came from outside her door, and the voice was immediately recognizable as her mother's.

By Leora M. Sies

"Dolley, dress quickly please. The gentlemen of the Congress will be arriving shortly and there is little time to waste." The sound of fading footsteps told Dorothea her mother was off to the kitchen to give the cook final instructions.

Little time to waste, indeed! In this city of Philadelphia there never seemed to be any spare time at all, what with the Congress in session, and the growth of the populace and tradesmen to serve them. Now, the seat of government was to be moved farther south still, to a swamp-ridden triangle of land culled from Maryland and Virginia and renamed Washington. Here would be the first true and independent capital of the American nation—and, after that, Dolley Todd would be abandoned and bored in the once more sleepy City of Brotherly Love.

Dorothea—no, Dolley, for that had actually been the name used since early childhood—knew that her tastes and feelings for life cried out for something better, something higher, but she was unable to make sense of the situation. One thing she knew for sure: She did not want to continue to be known only as the widow of the good Quaker Counselor Todd and remain forever with their son Payne Todd in this soon-to-be deserted Pennsylvania town.

To be present at Mrs. Payne's boarding house for dinner was one of the true pleasures to be looked forward to after a long day of political haranguing at Philadelphia's Congress Hall.

Burnished lamps of brass hanging on the walls gave the room a soothing glow, while the immaculate pewter service and damask linens at each setting provided circumstances for dining as luxurious as those anywhere in the thirteen States. Service was in formal Russian style, with each diner taking from a platter held by servants. The order of courses—fish, then game or meat—was scrupulously observed in highest continental fashion. Even dessert, in the form of the "iced cream" made from Tom Jefferson's imported French recipe, might be available.

All of these things, however, were over-shadowed when the hostess at the far end of the table was none other than Mrs. Payne's daughter Dolley, whose radiance and charm were the envy of every woman in Philadelphia, and whose reputation had even reached and impressed the jaded ears of the most sophisticated city in the country: New York.

A gentleman from New York had arranged this evening's dinner: Aaron Burr, known for his handsome appearance and shrewd political views, was perhaps the strongest of Dolley's admirers, and for good reasons. Recently a widower himself, with a young daughter, he considered Dolley an ideal match in more ways than one. It was no surprise, then, for Mrs. Payne to greet Mr. Burr at the door and find him in enthusiastic conversation on the subject of her daughter with his companion for the evening, James Madison.

"There could be no finer companion for me in life, James," Burr was saying as he handed his walking stick to Mrs. Payne with his usual lack of regard for female listeners. "She is radiantly beautiful, speaks with elegance, and our children would provide good companionship for one another."

"And politically, Burr, she *is* ideal is she not?" responded Madison, not without a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Aaron Burr's brief glare—which rapidly broke into an innocent smile—did not deter James from his line of thought. He knew full well that Dolley was George Washington's relation by marriage and Patrick Henry's cousin by birth. He also knew that these connections, combined with Dolley's charm and wit, would be of inestimable value to a man contemplating the presidency.

Burr stared at James, evidently able to read his every thought. Walking him away from other arriving guests into a corner of the immaculate foyer, he confronted him without hesitation. "James, last month I came to you in good faith, you know, and confessed my fascination with this woman. I am determined—as you also know—that she is to become my wife." Slowly rubbing the corner of his mouth with his index finger, as was his habit when he spoke confidentially, Burr continued, "And you—without much prompting, I might add—offered your good services in representing my better qualities to this lady."

Burr stared at the wall and brought his finger delicately to a halt on his chin. "Unless, of course, my good friend, you have decided that Mrs. Todd is more suitable a match for you yourself?"

James suddenly realized that although Burr remained facing the wall, the fellow's eyes were full on him and glowered with contempt.

"Dolley—Mrs. Todd—is quite capable of choosing for herself whomever is to be her friend, Burr," James replied without evasion. "I have talked about—or attempted to talk about—you whenever the occasion has presented itself and in the finest light imaginable—"

"I don't think you had anything to be ashamed of when discussing my finer attributes—"

"Nor did I mean to imply such a thing!" James had cut off Burr with a tone of voice that had become somewhat frosted.

The New Yorker began to feel an extraordinary sense of betrayal in the air. With a resonance of voice that took James by surprise, Burr swung about to face him directly and growled, "Madison, so help me, if you have exhibited treachery toward me in this matter I shall have no choice but to—"

"A very good evening to you, Gentlemen!" The voice was feminine, mellifluous and immediately recognizable. Burr and Madison turned and faced Dolley herself, come to bring her guests into dinner. "I am, I assure you, honored to have in our house two of the supreme political minds in the nation. But, Gentlemen, do you not think the debates should be left behind in Congress Hall at least for a single evening?"

Aaron Burr, taken by surprise for once, turned to Dolley and smiled. He could not be sure how much of the argument she had heard, and was about to lead her into the dining room when the unbelievable (at least to Mr. Burr) occurred: Dolley, offering her arm to James with a gleam in her eyes that was not all amusement, asked, "Mr. Madison, would you do me the honor of leading our party to the table?"

At that instant Aaron Burr realized that any hope of securing Dolley Todd as his wife was lost. As he walked behind James and Dolley, casually joking with his dinner companions, he had only one thought. "The presidency of the United States shall be mine, with or without the charming Mrs. Todd at my side."

After the dinner guests had departed, James invited Dolley for a stroll around the block in the refreshingly cool air of early autumn. "After all," he said, "we are the only city with brick walks on practically every street. Let us make good use of them." James let several moments go by. Then reaching a corner, he turned to Dolley and said, "About Aaron Burr—"

"What about him?" Dolley's voice was not at all angry and even had the slightest hint of amusement in its melodious lilt.

James, taken aback, and for some reason finding himself blushing slightly continued. "In the wars, you know, he demonstrated himself to be one of the most courageous men at Washington's side and . . . and he. . . ."

His words withered away at the touch of Dolley's maroon velvet glove upon his cheek. Her eyes, slightly moist, met his directly, then dropped down slightly. "You know, James, I don't care a fig for Burr. It has been you I have cared for since we met several months ago."

"But Burr is the sharpest politician in the Congress," James continued emphatically. "When he becomes president his wife will be the—"

Dolly had silenced him by placing her gloved fingers gently upon his lips. "Sharpest politician or no, James, it is you I love . . . and, as for who shall be president, well, the idea of Burr in this position is absolute nonsense. The Congress is dominated by Virginians, and surely both you and I, being originally from Virginia, should know better than to think that a scheming New Yorker could get their backing. You really are quite wrong, James."

He hardly heard her words and his head began to spin. *"It is you I love."* Had he heard her correctly?

"Then, there is nothing between you and Burr?"

"James, how could you ever think such a thing?"

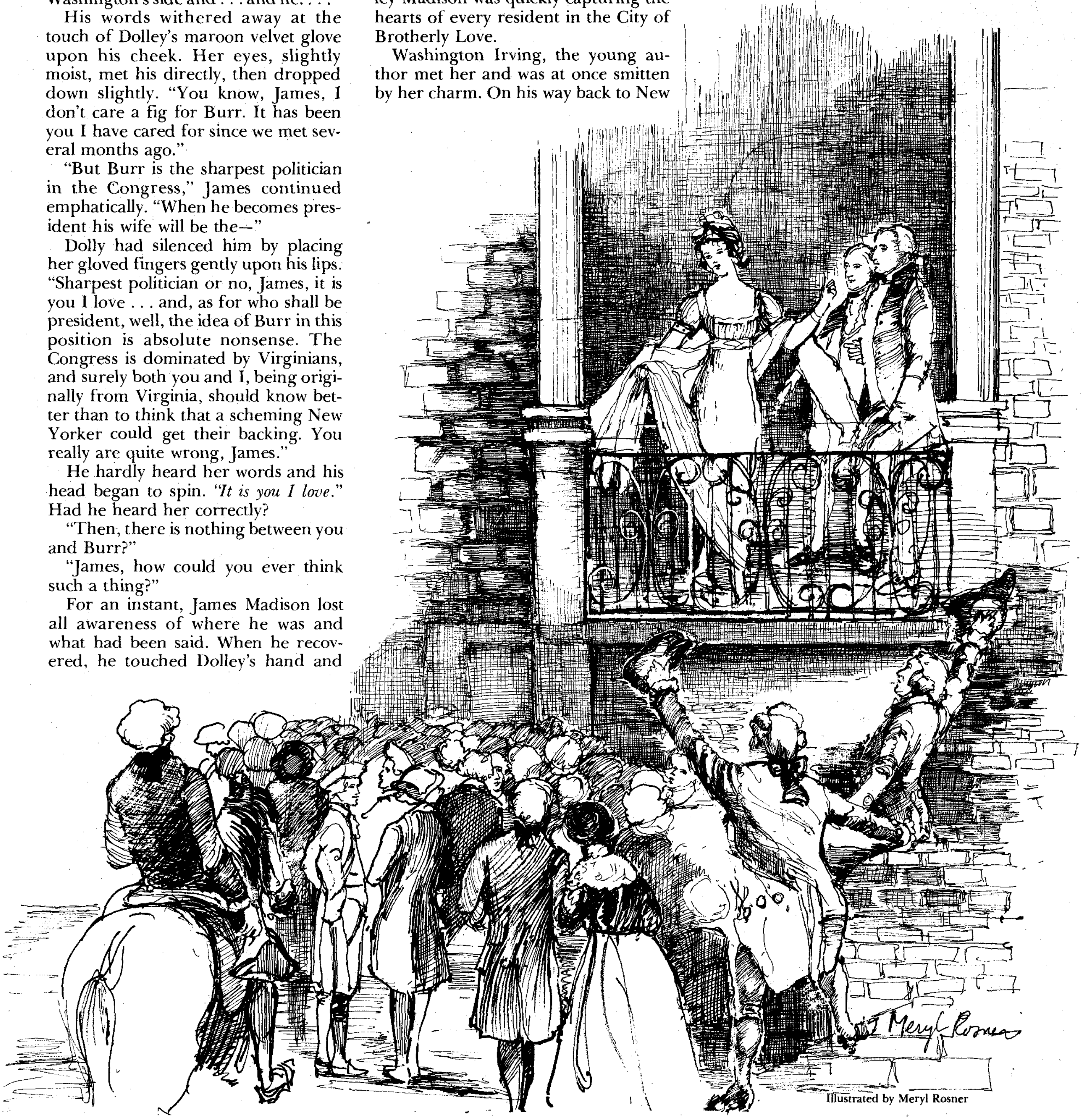
For an instant, James Madison lost all awareness of where he was and what had been said. When he recovered, he touched Dolley's hand and said, "My dear Dolley, would you do me the honor of considering my proposal of marriage?"

The wedding of Dorothea Todd in 1794 was the cause of much rejoicing and raised eyebrows in Philadelphia. Within weeks after returning from their honeymoon, it was obvious that James Madison was quickly taking command of Congress Hall, while Dolley Madison was quickly capturing the hearts of every resident in the City of Brotherly Love.

Washington Irving, the young author met her and was at once smitten by her charm. On his way back to New York from Philadelphia, Irving noticed with delight Burr's familiar face beside him. "Burr! All the way to Manhattan for you, too?"

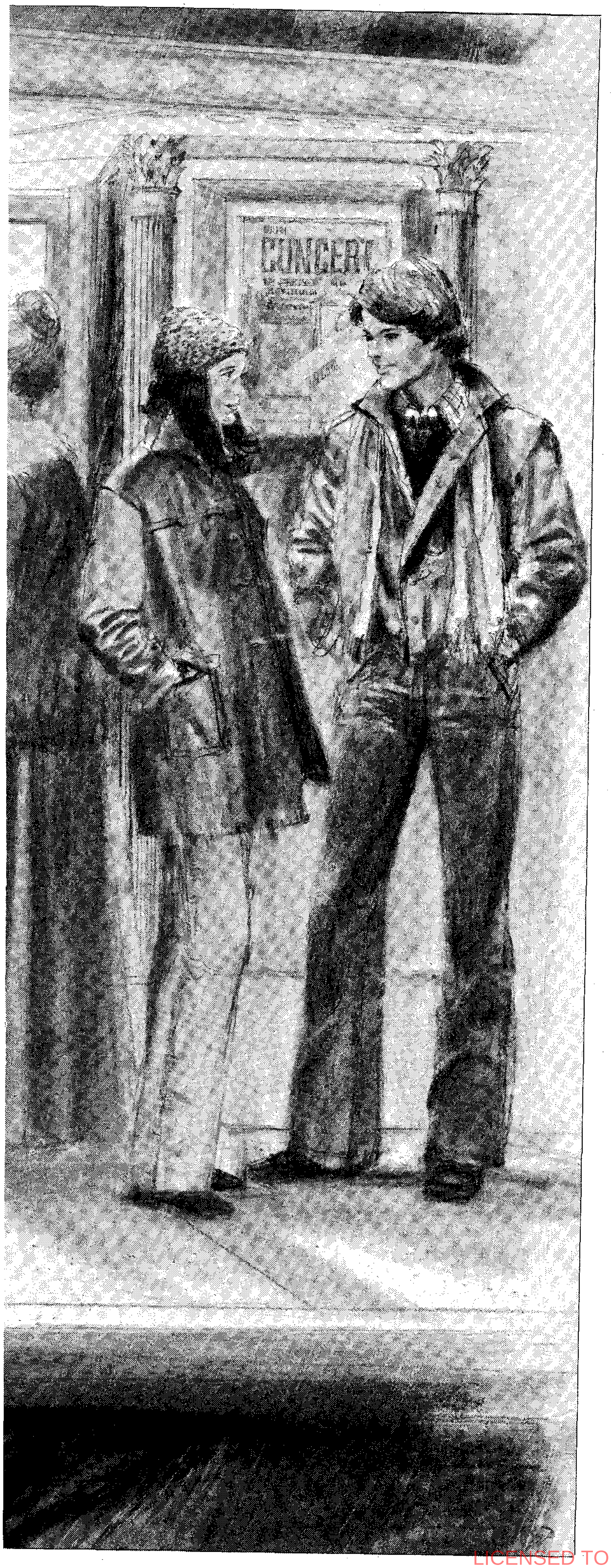
"Ah, Irving—good to see you. Yes, back to Manhattan for a bit of rest," Burr replied, pulling his fur blanket closer about himself to ward off the early January cold. "Besides, the pres-

(Continued on page 64)



Illustrated by Meryl Rosner

Illustrated by Jim Woodend



the Beginning of Things to Come

That night their lives trembled on a precipice—love would die or be reborn

The fight was over as quickly as it had begun. It had arisen, as usual, out of nothing. A bitter, acrid exchange of words, growing and feeding on itself, while the actual cause was already lost, forgotten, unimportant.

Lisa caught sight of her face in the ornate mirror above the Adams fireplace and was shocked at how old she looked. Her cheeks and lips were colorless, with only her eyes, almost purple-black with anger, providing any sort of contrast. She felt the first inexorable sensations of the dreaded, now familiar trembling. It usually resulted in every inch of her body's falling victim to uncontrollable spasms.

Robert's anger was already spent. He stood in the doorway, a cigarette trailing ash onto the thick white carpet, his attractive mouth now just a tight, straight line.

"There seems little point in thinking about the concert now," he said, and merely put the two tickets on top of the onyx table as Lisa made no reply.

She cried after he left, after she heard the slam of the front door, and she talked aloud to herself as she often did nowadays. Her words were largely incoherent, soft murmurings of comfort, regret, even chastisement. She wept for the destruction of the evening, their beautiful, long-awaited evening, where they would both have drowned ecstatically in the exquisite music of the Beethoven concert. Music had been their salvation in these past, difficult years. They could always rediscover their rapport, their total interdependence, in a magical passage of Beethoven. But not tonight. Beethoven couldn't save them tonight. Lisa doubted if anything could.

And that was the greatest sadness of all. The feeling that there was nothing left. That out of the marvelous, exciting love that had once been theirs,

A short story by Greta Nelson

there was now nothing at all. Lisa felt a wave of anger against the erosion of time. Time was the great destroyer. It withered the flowers, the trees, the soft, dewy cheeks of young girls, the glorious, untapped strength of young men. It withered nations, would wither the world one day, according to the scientists. It had certainly withered their love. Robert's and hers. And yet there had been a time when she had thought that their love was invincible, inviolate, as safe as a fortress.

They made a storybook couple: the gentle, blonde Lisa, as rich as Croesus, because of her father's chain stores; and the angry young man from the provinces, Robert C. Douglas. With all the natural force of a hurricane he had swept into her life in her first year at the university, and their love had been instant and passionate and totally durable (or so she thought).

Her parents wondered anxiously about the hard, practical streak in this young man who so obsessed their daughter, but they liked his candor, his brain, and his love for Lisa, which he wore proudly like a knight-of-old wearing his lady's colors. Their worlds came together naturally and effortlessly. He introduced her to pub lunches and skittles, and she invited him home for weekends, where he lay on the velvet lawns and was frightened at his love for this gentle, lovely girl.

They married before he qualified as an accountant, and he frowned on the unsubtle gifts and monetary help her parents insisted upon giving. But his resentment (which he controlled, for her sake) spurred him on, so that he studied at a killing pace and ended up with a brilliant degree.

He was snapped up by a large advertising concern, where he rockketed to the top within three years, and they moved from their small semi-detached to a Georgian town house in the suburbs. Life was so wonderful that each, separately and privately, agonized that such perfect happiness had surely to end. But their Utopia was to last a while yet.

Lisa taught piano during the day, and at six o'clock she would wait for Robert and would wonder for how much longer she could go on feeling like a bride of two weeks.

They bought a weekend cottage, a two-bedroom stone building with wisteria at the front porch and two ring-collared doves in residence at the back. Their weekends were like miniature honeymoons; they lazed in bed, reading the papers and drinking coffee, and then they wallowed in their solitude, their privacy, their total self-sufficiency.

The first chink in their euphoric state came with the non-arrival of a family. Each month, Lisa checked, held her breath, re-counted days with an obsessive feverishness, and then was plunged into such abject misery that Robert feared for her sanity.

"It's not the end of the world, Lisa. We're young, my darling. We've plenty of time. Some people wait for ages. And if we can't have children of our own, we'll adopt." He would hold her tightly to him, longing to feel the tenseness leave her, waiting for her to curve herself fluidly against him. But the tenseness grew each time.

It wasn't a constant pattern at first. It just hit them at intervals, when Lisa's contemporaries began to produce, and it didn't help that Beth, Robert's sister, was as prolific as a rabbit. Robert made light of things.

"I couldn't bear it," he said to Lisa. "All those diapers, all those broken nights of sleep, all those school fees looming on the horizon. I really couldn't bear it." But his smile had died suddenly, as Lisa's eyes had frozen him out for the first time.

The doctors were non-committal. These things were occasionally quite inexplicable. Things seemed to be perfectly normal. Give it time, they said. And time, being its own master, sped by at an unbelievable rate, and somewhere, amidst all those fast-passing months, their total affinity was damaged. Non-communication crept in, insidiously, almost unnoticed at first, so that they still played out their normal routines, went to theaters, had friends in, visited in-laws, went for the annual holiday abroad. But beneath the veneer of accord ran the undercurrent of heartache and disappointment, or worry and despair. The arguments were miniscule at first, slight eruptions of temperament that melted away in the face of their mutual making-up. But angry words are easier to say a second time, and there *was* a second time, of course. And a third. And so on, until slinging matches developed in which it seemed they both tried their best to hurt, to stab, to wound.

Robert took refuge in work, and further refuge (meaningless though it turned out to be) in his new secretary, a lady of considerable feminine wiles. A careless lie revealed all to Lisa, and she of the gentle voice, and soft, dove eyes, screamed at him like a fish wife and told him to go. He didn't and they eventually built up some sort of security again, which cushioned them well enough until evenings like tonight. It was almost as if the fights were a seasonal necessity, a regular purging.

Lisa got up and went into the bathroom. She splashed water onto her red eyes and re-did her hair. It still wasn't showing even a sign of gray, and she would be thirty-eight next birthday. Robert already had twin wings of silvered hair at the temples. Distinguished, their friends said. Running out of time, Lisa thought. There was no time left, because they no longer communicated. How could he ever know the pain within her at being childless? He had his work, his whiz kid deals on the Continent, his secretaries. Lisa retracted that at once, for she knew it wasn't fair, wasn't even true. It had been a single, temporary lapse with the fair Caroline. Rumor had it that she had already moved on twice elsewhere. Time would run out fast for the Carolines of this world.

Lisa felt the trembling ebb away, like receding waves on a shore, and she felt exhausted but stronger already, like a man surviving a disaster and welcoming a second chance of life.

She walked through to the living room and picked up the tickets. Too late to phone friends now. Besides, it was always only Robert she wished to be with. But maybe she could pass the tickets on to some young music lovers. She got her coat and went out to the car.

The line outside the Albert Hall was enormous, and the night air was colder than Joanna had thought, as she huddled a bit further into her duffel coat. She'd put wool socks on, and her denim jeans were tough and wind proof, but nevertheless, it was a cold night, and she half-wondered whether to abandon her place in the line and get back to the warmth of her studio apartment. Not that that was much warmer, unless she spent a fortune in slotting coins into Mrs. Slater's gas meter. Joanna shivered and thought fleetingly of home, where Mom would probably be making supper and hot chocolate, and Bramble the dog would be spread out on the rug, hogging all the fire.

Joanna squared her shoulders and made a rule that there were to be no further thoughts of home. She had chosen London in the face of great

(Continued on page 66)

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

Emma

BY
CLARE FRANCES HOLMES

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

Emma

As long as I live, I shall always remember seeing Syriol descending the big oak staircase that night of Christmas Eve at Swanbrook Park.

She wore a long, full dress of crimson velvet, ruched and gathered to encircle and set off her creamy shoulders. She held her head high; a poppy-like flush warmed her cheeks and heightened her deep coloring. Triumph glinted in her eyes. She held her left hand aloft as she passed me in the hall. It was as much as to say, "This evening I shall become engaged to Angus. He will place his ring upon my finger tonight. And from the time of our marriage I shall become, totally, the mistress of Swanbrook Park."

There was quite a gathering in the great hall of Swanbrook Park to see Syriol and Angus set off for the County Ball. Angus took Syriol's hand and drew about her shoulders her long, satin-lined cloak edged with fur. She turned at the door to bestow a smile upon all of us. Someone called, "Have a wonderful time. Don't dance too many quadrilles." Then Angus turned the huge door handle and opened the front door to the air outside. A bitter blast blew into the warmth of the hall; candles flickered; the lamp that Simons, the butler, held high paled in the rush of frosty air. Two horses waited in their shafts, pawing the ground, ready to drive the carriage.

"Don't be too late to bed," cried Angus, and he turned for a last look at us all from the doorway. I saw his cheery red face, long drooping moustache, his merry eyes shot with tiny red veins. Still talking volubly, he escorted Syriol outside. Then they had gone. The hall door was hastily closed, and gradually, one by one, the group of people in the hall turned and went away.

Mrs. Partington, the housekeeper, disappeared into her cozy room; Simons went to his pantry; Ethel, the housemaid, vanished into the servants' hall. And I noticed, without appearing to watch, that Nicholas took the hand of Cecile, and drew her into the library.

I also turned and went upstairs. Up three flights of stairs to my home in the turret room.

"Have they gone?" Hugh asked, as I went into the sitting room.

"Yes," I answered. "Though the weather is terrible. It is hardly safe to take the horses out."

"Hoskins is a good driver," Hugh replied. "He knows the way. What a pity you could not go to the County Ball, too, Emma. I feel guilty that you are tied to my side and can so seldom get away."

"I do not wish to go to the Ball," I answered, and this was true. But I went to the big window of the turret room to watch the carriage pulling away. On the narrow road of the valley the horses were forcing themselves ahead. In the light of the moon the air was gray, the long stretches of grassland shone like beaten silver. I dropped the curtain and turned away.

But my story began much earlier than this Christmas Eve. It began for me in the year 1832, when I was eight years old.

I can remember sitting in Mrs. Partington's parlor, and saying, "Please, Mrs. Partington, tell me how I first came to Swanbrook Park."

It was winter then, too. Mrs. Partington was younger, of course. She sat bolt upright in her chair in her black dress, her hair hidden beneath a mobcap of starched lace. Her round, indeterminate face betrayed a smile as she began marshaling her facts for the unfolding of her story—it was not the first time this history had been told. I remember I held a mug of chocolate in my hands, savoring the warmth of the drink, and my enjoyment of the story to come.

"Mr. Hugh Colville was always delicate," Mrs. Partington began. "Even as a boy, it was evident. He could not go to boarding school like Mr. Angus. He had a tutor and studied on his own. He was always to be found in the library, studying Greek, Latin and the like. He was clever—brilliant, some said. Who knows to what heights he might have been called had not fate decreed another course? For he was early found to be a victim of that terrible scourge of our times, consumption," Mrs. Partington said. And she rolled the word around her lips, endowing it with all the malignancy of its power. "He was consumptive as a child, and so throughout his life he has remained."

I thought of Mr. Hugh, tall and thin, with his lean face, browny-beige in color, and his hair swept back from his brow; hair that had once been chestnut in tone but was now shot-through with gray. Often he closed his eyes and his lashes trembled on his cheeks, as if his eyes were some captive, living things that could not escape.

"When Mr. Hugh knew that no career was open to him," Mrs. Partington continued, "he asked that the suite of rooms at the top of Swanbrook Park should be made available to him. Sir Frederick instantly gave permission, and Lady Adelaide personally furnished this top-floor apartment. You know these rooms well, Emma," Mrs. Partington said to me. "These rooms have been your home, almost from birth. The turret rooms at Swanbrook Park," she added. "Would you like more chocolate, child?" she asked me, filling my cup from a stone jug that stood on her hearth.

The turret rooms sprawled across the top story of the big house, self-contained, remote from the rest of the household. They were a small establishment, a tiny kingdom in themselves. From the big windows one could see for miles across the farmlands, the winding road of the valley, the all embracing, arching sky.

"When he was almost twenty," Mrs. Partington resumed, "Mr. Hugh was taken ill with a violent spasm caused by his consumption. The doctor advised a period in a sanatorium, so Mr. Hugh left home and was taken by carriage to a hospital in Sussex. He stayed there for one year.

"When Mr. Hugh returned home, after his year in the sanatorium, it was clear that he had greatly benefited from the change. He could walk about the Park, read in the library, take a short stroll in the garden. But he retained the turret rooms as his personal sanctum.

"Yet, after a short time he seemed to fall into a decline. The weather here is harsh, as you know, Emma. When Mr. Hugh was confined to bed once more, he asked that the nurse who had cared for him during his stay in the sanatorium should come to Swanbrook Park to be his personal nurse and attendant. He spoke warmly of her medical knowledge and her skill. The doctor advised that Mr. Hugh's request should be granted. Sir Frederick immediately agreed."

Mrs. Partington paused, as if reviewing the past incidents and participants in a drama of her own. She regarded every member of the Colville family with devotion and interest; though her behavior was always formal in the extreme.

Miss Clemency Dawe wrote in reply to Sir Frederick's request for her services that she would be pleased to accept the position as nurse to Mr. Hugh, but unfortunately her circumstances had changed since Mr. Hugh was in St. Joseph's sanatorium. Miss Dawe's letter stated that during the months since she had nursed Mr. Hugh, her sister, a Mrs. Masters, had died.

"Mrs. Masters had been married for only a year to a young seaman, sailing out of Dover. Unfortunately, young midshipman Masters had been lost overboard off Cape Horn. And after only one year of marriage, young Mrs. Masters had been left a widow with a child one month old. A little girl, Emma Masters, who was, of course, the niece of Clemency Dawe.

"Miss Dawe had been obliged to leave the sanatorium to care for her sister and the baby. But young Mrs. Masters had been so overcome with grief that she had run upon the quay when her husband's ship returned to port. She had clung to the rigging and would not be moved, in spite of terrible rain and a howling gale.

"Clemency herself tore her hands from the rigging and took her back home. But the young widow had lost all will to live. Even though she loved her baby, she no longer wanted to face life without her husband. A fever and wasting illness set in. And when Emma was only five months old, her mother passed away."

I sat like one chilled to stone at this part of the story. I longed with a passion to see, to know, to feel my mother's touch. To hear this narrative recounted was the nearest, I felt, I would ever get to my own flesh and blood. Sometimes tears fell from my eyes, but they were healing tears and Mrs. Partington let them fall. She showed a wonderful understanding and judgment of the human heart, in an age not famous for its sympathy or tact.

"Miss Dawe had written that she had become the legal guardian of Emma Masters, and looked upon her new commission with some seriousness. She would come to Swanbrook Park if she could bring her infant niece with her. Miss Dawe felt sure she could nurse Mr. Hugh, whom she remembered with respect, and also discharge her responsibilities to her infant charge, if this would be acceptable to the masters of Swanbrook Park. Wisely, Lady Adelaide said the one to make the decision must be Mr. Hugh.

"Mr. Hugh accepted this proposition at once. And indeed the household would gladly have put up with any inconvenience, if only Mr. Hugh could regain some measure of health. A date and time were fixed for arrival. The turret rooms were redecorated and more furniture added. There was a room for Miss Dawe, a nursery for the infant Emma Masters, an additional bathroom and a dining room. A new maid, Ethel, was engaged to service the suite and deliver all meals upstairs from the family kitchens. We all, family and staff, gathered in the hall when Miss Clemency Dawe arrived."

And now Mrs. Partington had no need to describe Clemency, for I saw her in my mind's eye, perfectly preserved and as near to me as if, as it were, I could put out my loving hand and touch her. Clemency Dawe was tall, almost as tall as Mr. Hugh and he reached almost six feet. There was about her an immense quiet, an aura of inner strength, of secret reservoirs of knowledge and endurance.

"She held you in her arms when she arrived," Mrs. Partington continued. " 'This is Emma,' she said formally, as she regarded us all in the hall. 'Emma Masters.' " And I saw Mrs. Partington's eyes fill with tears. "I stepped forward to assist her, and took you from her arms. And thus, I was the first to welcome you to Swanbrook Park."

I grew up at Swanbrook Park knowing no other home except the turret, where I lived with Mr. Hugh and Aunt Clemency. There was a school in the village of Deeping St. Paul, nearby, and I became a pupil there. But my education was given depth and meaning by Mr. Hugh himself. He was a great reader and as soon as I had mastered my letters, he bade me read to him each day. In this way we progressed through the classics, I learned French and he supplemented my history and geography. I did not know it, but I was receiving a grounding in knowledge unusual for many girls of my age at this time.

Looking back, I can see that this was a period of great happiness for us all. Under Aunt Clemency's care, Mr. Hugh improved in health and spirits. He was able to get up a little each day. His laughter rang through the apartment. Aunt Clemency often unbent a little to share our merriment, and about her face there was a glow that showed her deep contentment.

I moved about Swanbrook Park as unobtrusively as possible, for I knew I did not truly belong there. One day no doubt, I told myself, Aunt Clemency and I must move on. I knew I was in a no man's land between the dining room and the servants' hall. I took my meals in neither and never entered, of course, the drawing room. I observed the members of the Colville family as from a distance—as if they were the characters in some remote, but deeply interesting play.

When I was twelve years old, Lady Adelaide died. Her plump and kindly presence had filled the Park. When the funeral was over, Sir Frederick felt he could no longer face his life at Swanbrook Park without Lady Adelaide. He purchased a villa in Italy and lived there for months at a time. He left his eldest son Angus in charge of the family's business interests abroad and extensive farming interests at home.

"I love the farms, Emma," Mr. Hugh often said to me. "How I would have loved to have been active in their management, had I been able to."

Swanbrook Park was built upon a promontory of land. The huge, imposing, Gothic pile lacked shelter, yet seemed to give shelter to the land it commanded—that land the tenant farmers worked.

Angus set to with a will to manage the vast estates. He was a big man, tall and florid, with the beefy shoulders and thighs of a farmer. Yet he seemed to lack the farmer's touch Sir Frederick had had. He could not communicate with his workers; he failed to rally his people to his side. They sensed he was not one of them and that their interests were divisive. It was impossible for Angus to see anyone else's point of view. The great zest and interest the tenant farmers had shown in their land faltered, and discontent became evident. Angus was mean concerning repairs and renewals and gradually the farms began to decline.

Two years later, Sir Frederick died at his villa in Rapallo. Upon his death Angus Colville inherited Swanbrook Park, its contents and the business interests and the farms.

I was now fourteen and perhaps not as perceptive as I might have been.

"Where has Angus gone, Emma?" Mr. Hugh would ask me. "I saw Baxter lead the carriage round to the front door this morning and Hoskins drove Angus away."

"He has gone to Droitwich Spa, I believe," I replied. Sometimes it would be Bath. Or London. "I wonder who has taken his fancy this time," Mr. Hugh would answer, almost to himself. "I hope the stakes at the gaming tables will not be too high. It disturbs me that he gives less and less time to the farms, and spends more and more time on his private pursuits. Has Nicholas gone with him?"

"Mr. Nicholas is at home," I answered, and I turned away in case Mr. Hugh should see my blush.

Nicholas Wetherby was four years older than I. He was a cousin of Mr. Hugh and Mr. Angus and had been brought up with them, making his permanent home at Swanbrook Park. Now, at eighteen, he was tall and thin, with a dash and flair about him which gave him great elegance and grace. His face was pale, with a light flush of color high upon his cheekbones. His eyes were gray and fringed with brown lashes; his flaxen hair, thick and straight and brushed upward, showing off a high forehead and even features. He showed small, perfectly formed teeth in his charming, though infrequent smile.

Already he was a great gambler and loved the social life of the district. "He will be indoors all today," I told myself. "Perhaps I shall see him. He won't speak to me, of course. He does not notice me. But I can, from a distance, observe him." I had, at this early age, fallen deeply, intensely and wildly in love.

I was at pains, young as I was, to hide my passion from those around me, however. I felt I would be ridiculed by the servants. Emma Masters was as likely to fall in love with the Prince of Wales and bear the disapproval of our gracious Queen Victoria. I also felt that Mr. Hugh and Aunt Clemency would not approve. As for Nicholas himself . . . his knowing of my feelings was an idea too outrageous to be borne.

When I was sixteen catastrophe struck my life. Without any fuss, any bother, any inconvenience, my Aunt Clemency passed away. We did not even know she was ill. She never complained. True, she looked pale and drawn, but Mr. Hugh had been running a fever and it was an anxious time. I helped her all I could.

But one morning she was found lying across the foot of Mr. Hugh's bed, still in her day clothes and nursing apron. She had died quite peacefully, it seemed, while we were all asleep. She had withdrawn her spirit from us as quietly, yet as surely and definitely, as she had lived.

My life became a storm of grief and weeping. "I never knew my mother," I cried to Mr. Hugh. "But Aunt Clemency has been more than a mother to me." Aunt, protector, parent, friend.

Mr. Hugh lay stricken, like one also dead. It was his condition that pulled me together.

"Can you continue to care for my brother, Emma, until other arrangements can be made?" Mr. Angus asked me, just before Aunt Clemency's funeral.

"Of course," I answered. "And afterward, too. No one else shall care for Mr. Hugh but myself." I felt this was what Aunt Clemency would have required of me. I felt this was what I must do with the rest of my life.

"You've got guts, Emma. I like guts," Angus said. "Bear up. I rely on you."

Nicholas came and took my hand in his. In spite of my grief, his touch warmed me. He said nothing, but I sensed his sympathy and wish to communicate his concern.

Aunt Clemency was buried in the parish churchyard of Deeping St. Paul. And I was now mistress of the turret rooms, with Mr. Hugh entirely in my care. However, he insisted that an elderly woman should come each morning from the village to perform the intimate duties of washing and personal care.

In spite of our loss, or because of the example and influence of my aunt, a period of near happiness gradually returned to Mr. Hugh and myself. We read together and viewed the heavens through his telescope. He told me many stories about the past and elaborated upon the history of the old house.

The one circumstance marring this quiet passage in our lives was the eroding state of the farmlands which we could see from the turret. "They are declining, Emma," Mr. Hugh told me. "Each day I can see their further decay. Parsons has left the Manor Farm, did you know? Ruskin has given notice to quit the Border Farm. Springall is talking of leaving the Valley Holding. Gibson has let the Upland Fields go to waste." It was true. Where once before a landscape of verdant fields, crops and farming activity had faced us, now stagnant decay, weeds, and neglected and empty lands stared at us.

I think it was this more than anything that affected Mr. Hugh. "Yes, he is ill," the doctor told me. "But it is no use thinking of a sanatorium or any other treatment. You are doing what you can, Emma. Continue as before. Call me if you need me." With these words he went away.

The circumstances of my own life troubled Mr. Hugh, as well. "You are nearly eighteen now, Emma," he said to me one day. "How attractive you've grown. You are delicate in build, true, but tall and graceful in your movements. And your auburn hair—I love to see it flowing long, with just the bandeau on your head. You should be attending balls, dancing classes, going riding with young men and your friends. And here you are, tied to the bedside of a middle-aged man. What of your future, Emma? What will become of you in the years ahead?"

I told Mr. Hugh not to speak of such things, that I was happy just as I was. Still, I would often sit at the top of the staircase, in the shadows, watching when Angus and Nicholas left the house in evening dress, for a social gathering or a ball. But I knew these were not for me, and the longing was kept as quiet and secret as my hopeless love for Nicholas, which did not change in intensity or pass away.

My future also caused Angus concern. He stopped me as I came out of the library one day with an armful of books. "The doctor has told me that Hugh is sinking gradually," he said. "It is to be expected. I know you will bear it with what fortitude you can. But we must consider your future, Emma. We must give the matter some thought."

He stood before me—big, bluff, hearty. His luxurious moustache showed red at the roots; his hair, tough and wiry, framed his ruddy face. He was dressed for traveling, for he was off to London on some private jaunt. "You must have a husband, Emma," Angus went on. "We must find you someone suitable. A nice young lawyer's clerk from Wardcliffe; a young man working in his father's business. I will mention it to Nicholas. Between us we will come up with an introduction or two. Yes, I'll do that. In the meantime. . . ."

His face became serious as he regarded me. "If anything should happen to Hugh, Emma, I want you to regard Swanbrook Park as your home, until your marriage. You love the library. You can catalogue the books. Yes, that's it. You can become librarian until future arrangements are made.

"Though it is a pity," he went on, "you are not more comely. You are going to be a beauty . . . of a certain type," he qualified. "Not my taste at all. I like the members of your sex to be more mature. More worldlywise. With more color in their cheeks and hair. But no doubt you will appeal to some," he finished magnanimously. "We will find you a future match, without a doubt."

A flush had stained my cheeks at his words; into my mind had come the image of Nicholas. Tall, lean, turning swift as a blade, courteous yet remote. To him I was a member of the household, but one unremarked and unregarded. I doubted he would even be interested in discussing my fate.

Angus nodded kindly and went on his way. I went to find that Mr. Hugh's fever had increased; there was about him now a kind of frenzy that lapsed frequently into deep calm. He spoke of Clemency and held my hand between his own. "Sit with me, Emma," he said. "Stay with me. I need you as never before."

"I will not leave you," I said, and I clasped my hands around his wasted arms. I knew he had not long to live and a deep sadness filled my heart.

This was how things were as Christmas Eve approached in this year of 1842. Hugh was sinking, but preparations were going apace for a happy Christmas at Swanbrook Park. Angus had gone to London to fetch Syriol

Claverly—his guest over the festive season. Nicholas was expecting Cecile du Plessis to arrive at any time. Mrs. Partington was preparing a goose, pheasants, ham, a baron of beef, a suckling pig.

Decorations were going up in the hall and the drawing and dining rooms. Holly, mistletoe, laurel and fir perfumed the air. Wines and spirits were arriving by the case. The servants' voices were raised in anticipation of the benefits to come. Only in the turret was there quiet. I also had decorated the room and trimmed the tree. But Mr. Hugh and I sat alone, in the warmth and peace of our remote eyrie. It was as if we were both waiting. But for what we did not know.

When Syriol Claverly arrived at Swanbrook Park she seemed to fill the house with her presence. Her trunks piled up in the hall as if she had come for a year. She shook the frost from her thick fur cape, so that drops of moisture flew about the air. She was kindly in her greeting but a trifle condescending. She saw herself, perhaps, as a high-born London lady who had deigned to visit a remote country house. Her big bold eyes ranged over everything. In spite of her slight look of disdain, I had the strong impression she had come to seek her fortune with Angus at Swanbrook Park.

"Are you surprised, Emma, that I have turned serious at last?" Angus asked me, as we met on the stairway.

"Are you truly serious on this occasion?" I asked Mr. Hugh's brother. Angus roared with laughter, leaning against the curved railing of the staircase.

"I am drawing near it," he said. "Everyone must settle down at some time."

I flushed, wondering about this sudden change in Angus, for I knew he was a notorious womanizer.

On Christmas Eve, when Syriol and Angus set off for the County Ball in Wardcliffe, it was quite by chance that I stood in the great hall of Swanbrook Park to see them go. I had wanted a lemon drink for Mr. Hugh from the butler's pantry. As I stood drawn back from the family, watching the revellers depart, I noted Angus's immaculate evening dress, saw that his hair and moustache had been pomaded. He had decided after all to take the plunge. "We shall announce our betrothal at the supper interval," he told us, throwing his arms out in an expansive gesture. "We shall return engaged. We will ask for your congratulations, then. Be good while I'm away!" The big door closed behind them and they were gone.

I saw Nicholas tighten his hold on Cecile's hand as he drew her into the library. The door closed behind them. Cecile had glanced at me, smiling slightly. The look was tentative, neither brash nor overbearing as was Syriol's. But Nicholas did not look my way at all.

This was the first time Nicholas had entertained a woman as his personal guest. Cecile du Plessis was slim and stylish, as became her French origin, with beautiful skin and hazel eyes.

"Her mother is a French countess. In Paris," I heard the cook, Annie, telling Ethel. "Her stepfather is a wealthy man. It is understood she will inherit a great deal of money upon his death."

To me Cecile seemed a little bland and characterless for someone like Nicholas. I had expected him to be attracted to a woman with far greater social connections and easy grace. Yet Nicholas was by no means shallow with feelings and a life visible only on the surface. He was a rapier, not a blade.

I passed the open door of the library on my way up the great staircase, past the hanging tapestries, the knights in armor, the crossed swords of forgotten soldiers of the Colville family. From the library I heard the sudden rattle of dice, the clink of glasses, voices . . . "No, let's play cards . . ." and I knew that Nicholas was engaged upon the passion of his life. He was urging Cecile to play his everlasting games of chance; betting ridiculous chances against ridiculous odds. I heard Cecile's squeals of protest and pleasure; I even heard the cards fall on the baize-topped table. If Angus was a womanizer, Nicholas was a dedicated and compulsive gambler.

I pondered this trait in the character of the man I secretly loved, as I entered the turret rooms and placed the lemon drink beside Hugh's bed. But one does not love the less because there are faults. Sometimes the vulnerability faults reveal endear their possessor to us more. Hugh was sleeping a little and I crossed to the window and drew aside the drape.

It was snowing now on top of the icy roads. The flakes fell past my window and disappeared into the clouded darkness of an unfriendly night. I shuddered and let the curtain fall. I settled Mr. Hugh for the night, then sat for a few minutes looking at the crimson decorations I had draped around the walls. The tree with its burden of tinsel glinted warmly in the light. I put out the lamp and went along the short passage to my own room.

I do not know what time it was when the uproar woke me. It was still dark. I sensed rather than saw that the snow was still falling. The air in my bedroom was bitterly cold. I heard a commotion outside the front door of the house and clamor up and down the stairs. I slipped out of bed, and instinct told me to dress myself in warm clothing.

The front door stood open. A wild, cold wind was blowing into the hall where all the servants were assembled, including Mrs. Partington in a heavy dressing gown, and Simons, the butler. Nicholas and Cecile had also entered the hall from the library.

Suddenly, through the darkness of the night outside we saw a figure framed in whirling snow. Syriol, half sprawled, half staggered into the house. Her beautiful crimson dress was stained and torn, her long black cloak ripped almost in two. Her face was bruised and blackened. She moaned, flung out her arms in a desperate gesture and collapsed.

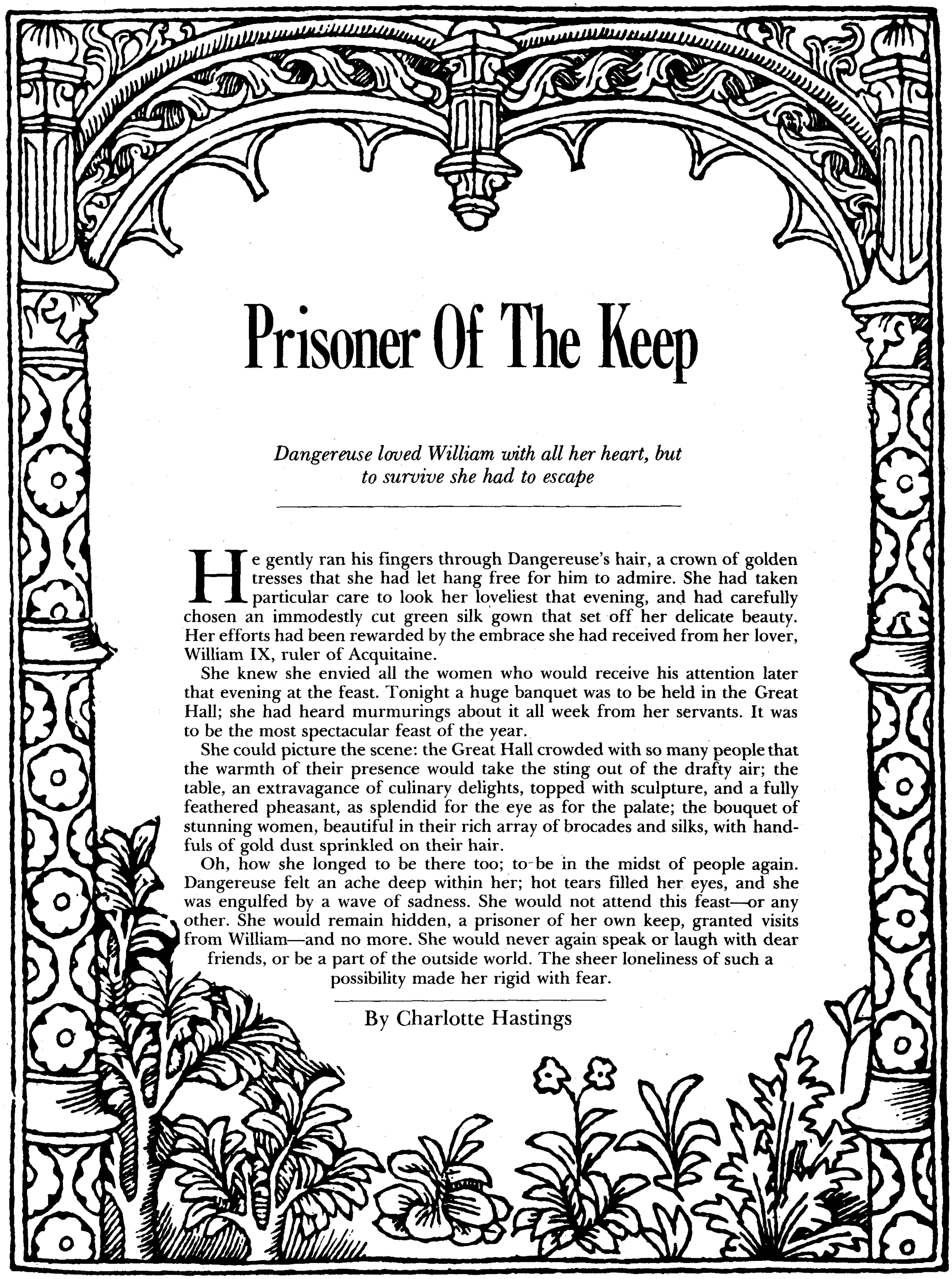
"What has happened? Where is Mr. Angus?" cried Mrs. Partington. "Baxter! Go outside and try to discover what has occurred. Where is Hoskins? Take a lantern. Report back to me here." Dimly I saw Baxter run out into the snow without a coat or even a scarf for his throat.

Nicholas had dropped to his knees by Syriol's side, and I also hurried to her aid. Nicholas deferred to me, knowing, as did the others, that I had gathered much medical knowledge during my years with Aunt Clemency and Mr. Hugh. Swiftly, I felt for her pulse and listened to her breathing. I touched her limbs lightly but firmly, seeking a fracture or a serious displacement.

"She is not injured. She is shocked and bruised only," I told Nicholas and the assembled watchers.

"Help me to get her upstairs," Nicholas told Simons. But at their touch, Syriol, regaining consciousness without preamble, pushed their arms away. She dragged herself to her feet and staggered toward the still open door. She managed to reach the doorway, then tried to fling herself outside into the blinding snow. I saw the wind whip her hair, saw her skin

(Continued on page 70)



Prisoner Of The Keep

Dangereuse loved William with all her heart, but to survive she had to escape

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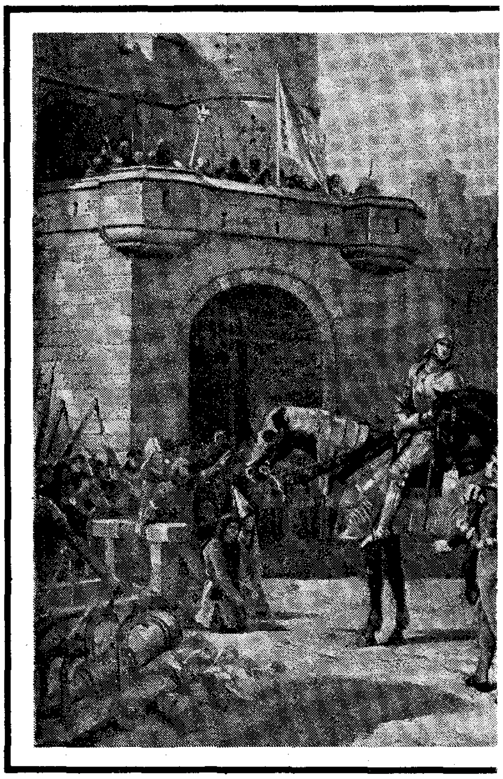
He gently ran his fingers through Dangereuse's hair, a crown of golden tresses that she had let hang free for him to admire. She had taken particular care to look her loveliest that evening, and had carefully chosen an immodestly cut green silk gown that set off her delicate beauty. Her efforts had been rewarded by the embrace she had received from her lover, William IX, ruler of Acquitaine.

She knew she envied all the women who would receive his attention later that evening at the feast. Tonight a huge banquet was to be held in the Great Hall; she had heard murmurings about it all week from her servants. It was to be the most spectacular feast of the year.

She could picture the scene: the Great Hall crowded with so many people that the warmth of their presence would take the sting out of the drafty air; the table, an extravagance of culinary delights, topped with sculpture, and a fully feathered pheasant, as splendid for the eye as for the palate; the bouquet of stunning women, beautiful in their rich array of brocades and silks, with handfuls of gold dust sprinkled on their hair.

Oh, how she longed to be there too; to be in the midst of people again. Dangereuse felt an ache deep within her; hot tears filled her eyes, and she was engulfed by a wave of sadness. She would not attend this feast—or any other. She would remain hidden, a prisoner of her own keep, granted visits from William—and no more. She would never again speak or laugh with dear friends, or be a part of the outside world. The sheer loneliness of such a possibility made her rigid with fear.

By Charlotte Hastings



Dangereuse was lured back into the present by William's gentle nibble on her ear. "My sweet, my love," he said. "You are looking so downcast this evening. Tell me what is wrong, and I shall try and right it with one of my songs."

Unable to voice her fears, Dangereuse only smiled and sighed, "William, my lord. My life. Promise me you shall always love me. Tell me that in our hearts it is you and I who are truly wed, and that you shall remain forever mine."

"Yes, yes," he murmured huskily, aroused by her plea. "But now I must be off to prepare for the guests. Tonight you and I will be together in spirit. But tomorrow. . . ." He left the room quickly, sensing Dangereuse would be pained by his departure.

Dangereuse moved listlessly away from the door and sat down before her one diversion: her weaving—the only activity that helped while away the long hours between William's visits. As she began separating the fine colored threads that so subtly combined to form a woven image, her mind wandered to the past, and to her astounding arrival at Poitiers.

She saw William for the first time in the court of Viscount Aimery of Châtellerault—her "legitimate" husband. William had stopped at Châtellerault on one of the extensive journeys he was in the habit of taking. There had been rumors for a long time that his supposedly unhappy marriage was responsible for his reckless wanderings about the land.

When the Duke of Acquitaine's entrance to Châtellerault had been announced, Dangereuse was present with her husband in the main hall to receive him. Her heart quickened the moment he entered; he was one of those magnetic male creatures whose powerful presence immediately took over his surroundings. He had arrived with a colorful entourage of four servants carrying sweetmeats and many bottles of vintage Acquitainian wine. William had approached Dangereuse first, gazing politely at her and then, startled by her beauty, had taken a second look that traveled the entire length of her body. He bowed low over her hand and touched his lips to her silken fingertips.

"I am enchanted by the elegance of Châtellerault and by the good taste of your court. But nothing I have seen so far in all of my travels could match your fine grace and beauty," he had said in a somewhat muffled tone, yet loud enough so that the Viscount could hear.

"I thank you for your compliment, my lord," Dangereuse had replied, embarrassed by William's bold praise. "You must join us now for a cup and some nourishment, and tell us more of your adventuresome travels—and of your renowned Acquitaine."

"Ah, yes, but I beg of you while I am here and in your rare and graceful presence, let me not bore us all by talk of me. Rather, let us speak of you."

Their dialogue had been interrupted by a snort of annoyance from the Viscount, whose honor couldn't permit such brash flattery to his wife by another man. The Viscount stepped forward abruptly, thrust himself between Dangereuse and William, and announced loudly, "The opportunity has finally come for us to entertain the Duke of Acquitaine. One that I have long awaited. Let us go now to the table and feast—and you shall tell me of these new Crusades, these marches to the Holy Land. I have longed to spend an evening talking man-talk."

Dangereuse had taken the opportunity to steal a look at the Duke, and had noted his clean-shaven face and long locks—almost touching his collar—that in no way detracted from his sense of manliness. He wore a tunic with loose, full sleeves, belted at the waist, which made him look every bit the poet that he was. His expression was one of nobility and determined self-will; still, his mouth held a smile that she longed to see, and there was a gentleness about him that Dangereuse had never before noted in a man.

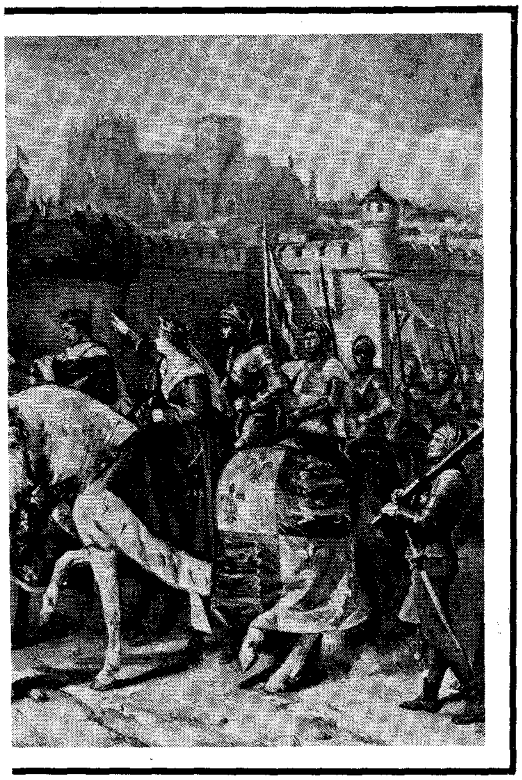
The Viscount attempted to guide William into the chamber next to the dining hall, but this forcefulness was to no avail, for William managed to maneuver himself alongside Dangereuse. They strolled into the next room, his hand lightly resting on her elbow.

"First, tell me, Madam, who you are and where you come from. A formidable family, I am sure, with grace such as yours." He once again swept his eyes over Dangereuse, relishing her beauty.

She blushed crimson, unused to such praise and frightened by the deep scowl on her husband's face. That scowl would remain the length of the evening, for try as he might to capture the Duke's attention, William was completely enchanted by the lovely Dangereuse, and no man could break the spell.

The evening had ended in disaster, with the Viscount openly showing his anger and frustration; politically he had been a fool to bid the Duke of Acquitaine such a cold farewell. Dangereuse had recklessly watched the Duke and his entourage as they left the castle, watched until they were just a tiny speck in the glow of the moon on the far horizon. In her heart she knew she would see him again.

One rainy September morning the Viscount was away, and Dangereuse was lounging in her bedchamber. Lately she had begun to resist morning preparations for the day; there seemed so little to look forward to. That particular morning she had let her thoughts drift far away. Suddenly the door was flung open, and there was William. At first she had been shocked at his entrance into her bedchamber. But almost immediately she was overcome with joy and relief. William had been in her



thoughts since their first meeting.

"There is no use in your protesting," he had begun without a word of excuse for his brash behavior. "I have loved you since I first laid eyes on you. And I have come to satisfy that love. Today you shall be mine, and tomorrow and forever. For I am taking you back to Aquitaine with me. Now!"

"You are—taking me—" stammered Dangereuse in utter disbelief. "But my husband, my children—what will people think?" she asked, questions that couldn't be answered rationally. To take a lover was one thing. But to go away, to leave everything behind!

"I have already made a place for you at Poitiers—I have built you a keep. You shall live in elegance and luxury, and shall be treated every moment as the wondrous woman you are. Do not pretend to feel remorse at leaving a husband whom you obviously loathe. As for the affections of the rest of your family and friends—I shall make up for them ten times over. I shall fill you with the nourishment of real love and adoration, and I promise you shall thrive. Someday you shall even love me too." William took her in his arms and kissed her gently on her lips. The instant he touched her, Dangereuse felt a jolt, a surge of pleasure she had never experienced before. She looked into his eyes and her breath stopped. She would never be able to resist him, for she realized that she had come to love him.

William's intemperate nature took over. He crushed her to him, the decision made and their fate sealed. She would be his. Together they had fled, leaving Châtellerault behind forever.

She would always remember the ride to Poitiers. Even now the rich panorama of brilliant countryside waltzed before her eyes. Remembrances of emerald forests, lush pasturelands, and purple vineyards had etched visions of Aquitaine's richness and beauty into her memory. They had crossed silvery rivers to escape the old life and to baptize the new. Dangereuse saw the sweeping green landscape, pure and untouched by the harsh hands of man, as a symbol of the love she knew would come to exist between William and herself. A love she would fight for to her very death.

William, too, had displayed his love and his pride to her when he brought her "home" to the keep. It had been named the Maubergeonne Tower, and from the windows in her chamber on the top floor Dangereuse could see the entire surrounding countryside. Her heart had been beating so loudly that she thought she could hear it as she had followed William through the halls to the door of her very own chamber. As soon as she entered all of the love that she had suspected him capable of was reaffirmed.

She had let her eyes dance round and round the room, taking in the impressions of splendor, from the handwoven tapestries and wall hangings that adorned the walls to the fine wooden ceiling that was coffered and painted in bright colors. A huge, wooden, canopied bed, covered with rich and colorful fabrics, dominated the rest of the furnishings in the room. Dangereuse would remember William's words on the night he had gently steered her toward the bed to consummate his love for her:

If my beloved her love will grant,
I am prepared to thank and take
And to dissemble for her sake,
And say and do what e'er she want;
Of her nobility I'll chant,
And all my songs for her I'll make.

Suddenly one of the delicate threads of Dangereuse's warp snapped in two, and instantly she was brought back to the present. She reproached herself for dwelling on the past so often; for, after all, what mattered was today, and today she was here with him. It had been almost a year now, a year of love—and of confinement in her own "little castle." But Dangereuse knew that a restlessness had already begun to set in, and the realization that she would never be William's lawful wife began to haunt her. Resentment had begun to mar their perfect love. Resignedly, she decided that she must ask her servant, Maedra, to sit the night with her to avoid the loneliness of her memories.

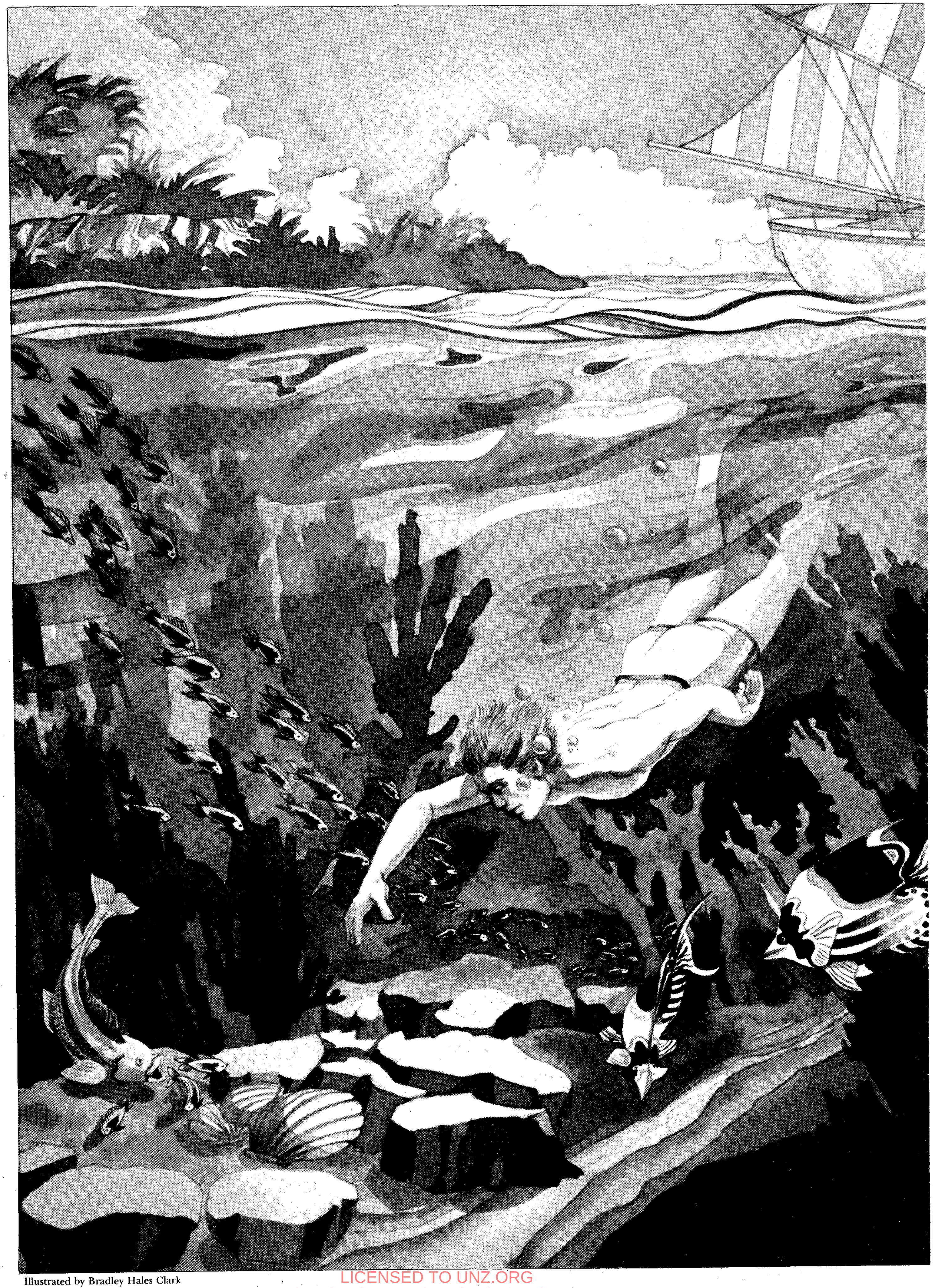
Just then, as if her thoughts had been read, the door began to open. Thinking it was Maedra coming to keep her company, Dangereuse forced a receptive smile on her handsome face. A smile that in an instant dissolved into an expression of loathing.

The room had suddenly become stifling, filled with the presence of the one woman who could make Dangereuse tremble with fear and shudder with repulsion. It was Philippa—William's wife. She was dressed lavishly in a lush black velvet gown, pulled tight at the waist with golden laces. Her brown hair had been piled atop her head and capped with a golden net. After aggressively flinging herself into the room, she glared at Dangereuse and spat words at her in a high, shrill voice.

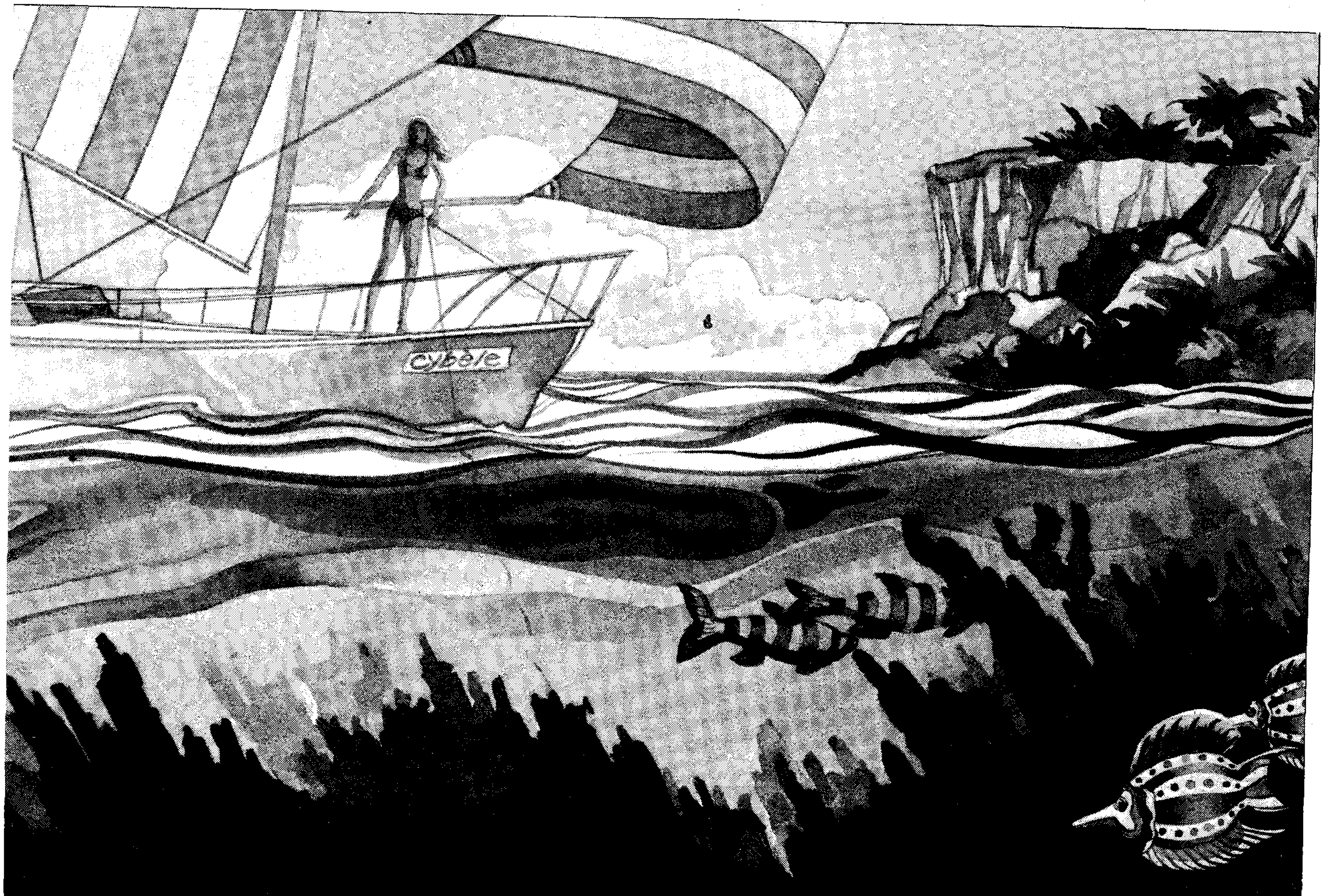
"I have come to invite you to the feast," she snarled. "You must prepare yourself. The people of Aquitaine already know you, and even speak of you as 'La Maubergeonne,' after the name of *your* keep. And I, William's true and lawful wife, have taken but a second seat alongside His Majesty." Philippa's words shot through Dangereuse like small swords piercing her heart.

"But I, Philippa, daughter of my father Count William IV, am the true head of this household. I am the true queen of this castle and the mother of William's children. You shall never replace me. You will remain hidden here, a strumpet cloistered from the world, growing old and gray, thinking you have the love of a fickle man.

(Continued on page 68)



Illustrated by Bradley Hales Clark



SEA CHANGE

Marion had on that silly look of mournful exultation that all women wear to weddings, and John could have cheerfully killed her

John Dougall stood on the dock watching *Cybèle* sail smoothly out of the harbor. His face gradually relaxed from the smile the circumstances had required to an expression that felt more natural. At least that lovesick puppy knew how to handle a boat—when he was thinking about it. Of all times to give him *Cybèle*—for a honeymoon cruise. For a whole week!

A short story by Ursula Carr

John flinched from the thought and tried quickly to find another. Beside him, Marion was wiping away a tear with that silly look of mournful exultation that all women seemed to wear to weddings. She could at least have left a look like that at the church, John thought sourly. Particularly as this was all her fault. Well, maybe not entirely her fault, he added grudgingly. If he hadn't been in such a hurry to clear all that clutter out of the cockpit . . . but damn, if only she hadn't put all that clutter in the cockpit in the first place, or at least hadn't left it there so long. John sighed.

"Wasn't it a beautiful wedding?" sniffed Marion with satisfaction, dabbing happily at her face with a hand-embroidered handkerchief.

John grunted.

"And doesn't *Cybèle* look nice in the sun," Marion went on, finally putting the handkerchief away. "Sails drawing well, too. David certainly knows how to handle a boat." She looked hopefully up at John, who was glowering at her ring. If it hadn't been for that stupid ring, that young punk wouldn't be sailing *Cybèle* off into a perfect sailing afternoon. For a whole week. Marion followed his gaze and, to some degree, his thought. "Just think," she said, spreading her fingers so that the ring sparkled, and gazing at it fondly. "If it hadn't been for the ring, they wouldn't be sailing off in *Cybèle* this very minute."

"No," said John, finally prodded into a reply. "They wouldn't." He took Marion's elbow gently. "Well, they're gone now. For better or for worse. Hope to heaven that fool boy remembers he's sailing a boat while he's sailing a boat."

Marion laughed archly. "Now, John."

"Club's open," replied John. "Let's go get a drink before we go home."

As they strolled along the deck toward the clubhouse, John thought dourly about the ring and the boy and the events of an afternoon nearly a month ago.

There was nothing wrong with the ring. Indeed, there was a great deal right with it—and with Marion's attitude toward it, John was forced to admit. Just a small diamond in an old-fashioned gold setting, but John had given it to her on the evening Marion promised to be his wife. In nearly twenty years he had never regretted his choice and, so far as he knew, neither had she. If she was a little silly about some things, well, that was the way women were. And he was glad she liked his ring. But between that ring and Marion's silliness, that stupid boy . . .

And yet there was nothing wrong with the boy, either. Young David was a good lad, polite and willing to please, and mad about boats. Yes, that was one thing in his favor. The boy had been mad about boats since he was a child. John scowled. He would just as soon not have remembered young David as a child. It brought to mind the caulking incident.

Of course, David had been just a kid then, with nothing for a boat but a beat-up old rowboat that was his pride and joy. He'd been busily caulking it that spring, years ago, stuffing the tow into the cracks with a rusty old screwdriver. Quite early in the year, it was. The snow had melted, but the ground was still muddy. The boy had wasted no time getting onto the water. John had told him he was using the wrong kind of tow, but John had spoken as he always did when he instructed children, and no boy listened to that tone of voice if he didn't have to. So young David had spent hours that spring poking that hard caulking into the old boat's seams, stuff that would never soften and fill the irregular gaps. When he finally launched the boat, it went right to the bottom, of course. And went right back to the bottom every time David hauled it out, bailed it, and launched it again.

And now *Cybèle* . . . but David had learned a lot about boats in the intervening years. And he knew a lot about *Cybèle*. John had taken the lad crewing often during the past few years. Marion wasn't much of a sailor, and John was a little past handling a twentyfour-footer by himself if there was much wind. And David was a skilled and willing crew. If only he would keep his mind on what he was doing. There was that time with the rudder . . . John wrenched his mind away from the time with the rudder. That afternoon last month was bad enough.

They had had a beautiful sail that morning. A couple of hours of blue and gold, surging through strong, cresting waves on a beam reach, heeling just enough to make John feel that this was sailing, but not enough to frighten Ellie.

For they had had Ellie along that day. This season, you could hardly get David to crew without asking Ellie along. By next year the boy would have his priorities straight, but this year—oh, well, Ellie was a nice enough girl. Obviously mad about young David and really picking up sailing quite fast. She was, John had to admit, rather more willing to do as she was told in a boat than David, and she certainly seemed to have a high regard for John's knowledge of boats and general seamanship. During his mellower moments, John felt that David could have done a lot worse.

The four of them anchored for lunch in a beautiful little cove in the lee of a steep point. Deep, clear water all around, setting off the blue rocks fifteen feet or more below the calm surface. Marion had brought all kinds of clutter. Seemed to feel she had to show off this summer, let the young folks see how well she could keep house on a boat or something. Good housekeeping on a boat, so far as John could make out, meant entertaining as if one was on land. No fistful of the Colonel's chicken and the other hand on the tiller this year. Food was even served on plates this year with napkins, and tea came in cups, with saucers, not mugs.

A little table to set up and serve from, a bag for scraps, sugar bowl and cream pitcher, salt and pepper, knives and forks and teaspoons—a teaspoon each, for heaven's sake, as if they couldn't have shared one among them, just to stir in sugar. *Cybèle*'s cockpit was of a fair size, but with all that gear in it—and four people, too—there was hardly room to turn around. John had gotten into the habit of helping Marion clean up, just to get the stuff out of sight. A bad example to set the young folks, but David would just have to sort out things like that on his own later on.

They had finished eating on that beautiful afternoon, and John had taken David forward to check the bow anchor while the women fiddled with something or other in the cockpit. When Marion finally seemed ready to clear away, they returned to help her. Briskly John had picked up the teacups, emptied the dregs of one into another, the last into the slop bucket, and the slop bucket overboard. As the slops hit the water Ellie cried out and Marion screamed. How was John to know that Marion had gotten grease on her precious ring and put it into a cup with a little dishwater to soak? No one would expect a ring in a teacup among the dirty dishes in the cockpit of a boat at sea—well, at anchor, anyway. Anyone but Marion would have just wiped off what grease she could and saved the rest for normal cleansing procedures at home.

Logic was beside the point, and John knew it. Marion's precious ring, the engagement ring that John had given her nearly twenty years before, was somewhere down among the blue rocks beneath them. And having an engaged couple around all summer had done nothing to desensitize Marion's notions about the importance of engagement rings. Marion had burst into tears on the spot, not noisily, but so genuinely that John's heart had twisted for her. It was Ellie, really, who saved the day. John had been lecturing Ellie on man-overboard drill that morning, while the girl listened with her customary rapt attention. "The most important thing of all," he had said, "is for someone on the boat to know at all times where the person

(Continued on page 69)

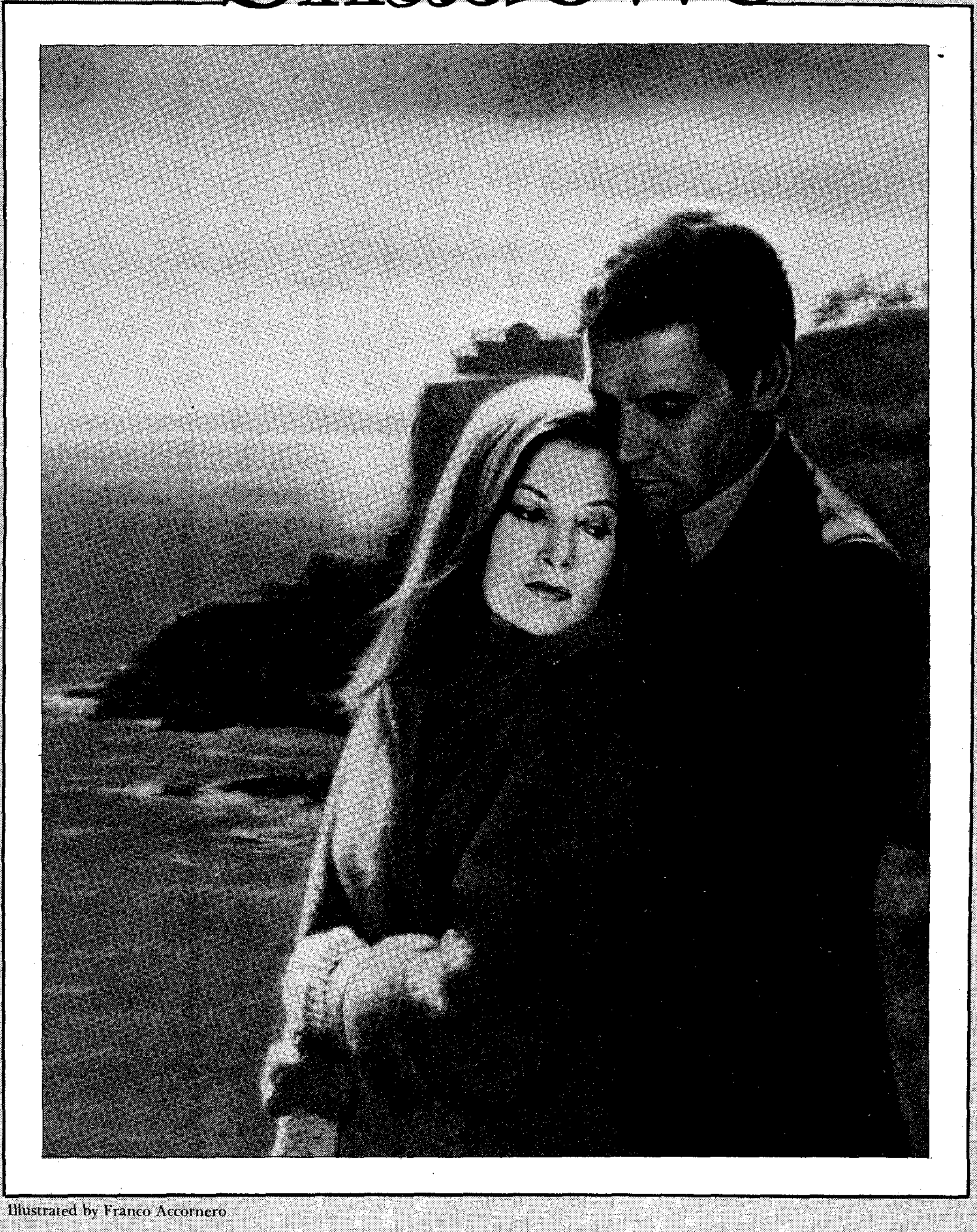
◆

And I, what is my crime I cannot tell,
Unless it be a crime t'have lov'd too well.

Richard Crashaw
Alexias

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

Peril in the Shadows



Illustrated by Franco Accornero

BY ANNECY SCOTT

A
CAMEO
NOVEL

Peril in the Shadows

IT'S absolutely beautiful!" Jan breathed, gray eyes shining in anticipation as she turned to unlock the heavy oak front door. Behind her, the sun, a mound of glowing cinders, was slipping gradually beneath the horizon. Its still-warm rays sparkled on the windows of the rambling manor house as Jan pushed open the door.

Ricky gave a shout of delight as he rushed past her into the large, wood-panelled entrance hall.

"Mummy, look at that fireplace! Father Christmas won't have any trouble getting down there, will he?" Words tumbled over each other as he stepped into the wide hearth with its ornately carved marble surround and peered up into the black cavity.

"Hang on a minute." Jan laughed, her own cheeks flushed with some of the same excitement. "We've only come to look at the house. It's much too big for the two of us; even if we could afford it—we'd be absolutely lost."

Leaving Ricky to his own explorations, she wandered from the hall into a spacious lounge where elegant but comfortable antique furnishings breathed a welcome. Deep crimson velvet curtains brushed the beeswaxed floor that even a fine layer of dust hadn't managed to dull. Beyond latticed windows, green lawns sloped steeply from a graveled terrace towards the rocky headland beyond, where in the early evening dusk curling waves gentled white foam towards the tiny beach. Jan knew that a narrow lane twisted its way from the manor grounds to the small natural harbor, but overhanging hedgerows concealed it completely as she stood gazing down.

All this belonged to her and Ricky. Jan was thrilled. She thought with gratitude of her godmother, whose home this had been. Mrs. Linton had been a close friend of Jan's parents while they were alive and had always kept in touch with her goddaughter, though their last meeting had been at Jan's wedding seven years ago.

Jan's slim shoulders drooped and her lips quivered as the memory of David seared her mind, still a bitter shaft of pain. He'd been a civil engineer and they'd met when he was in England between contracts. Girlhood dreams hadn't prepared Jan for the whirlwind romance that hurtled her, breathless, through one of the briefest courtships on record, a simple wedding attended by her godmother and a handful of friends and, with confetti still in her blonde curls, on to the gigantic airliner which bore her and David toward a new life together in Africa.

Ricky's birth a year later completely filled the small lonely void she'd felt since her parents died, an empty corner even David hadn't quite been able to fill. His work took him away very often, but she'd soon made friends and settled happily into their small white bungalow on the outskirts of town.

The faulty bridge that he'd been inspecting collapsed and killed not only David but most of Jan's reasons for living. There was Ricky of course, but the bitter nighttime tears that etched mauve shadows beneath Jan's gray eyes threatened for a while to drown even the warmth generated by his wide, tip-tilted smile that was such a painful echo of David's. The two years that had passed since David's death had been hard, though Jan had tried not to let her own grief overshadow the little boy's high spirits. Life had still gone on, of course, but drearily, until the morning Jan opened the solicitor's letter containing the incredible news that her godmother, Mrs. Linton, had died, naming Jan as the only beneficiary of her will.

Her godmother had no family of her own, but Jan had never in her wildest dreams imagined that she might one day inherit Chapters, this sprawling

Cornish manor, surrounded by acres of land which tumbled down to the sea.

But it was so big. She'd have to part with it.

"There's little money, apart from the value of the estate, I'm afraid," Mr. Spencer, her godmother's solicitor, had told her when she visited him a few days after returning to England. "Mrs. Linton had quite a struggle to keep the place going in the last few years. In fact, I strongly advised her to accept one of the very lucrative offers she received for the property. But she refused to consider parting with it."

Lost in thought, Jan jerked back to the present as through the window she spotted Ricky running along the terrace outside the house.

"Come out here, Mummy, and see what I've found!" he called, catching sight of her, his brown eyes sparkling.

Jan unlatched the casement window and leaned out.

"All right. But I've hardly started looking around inside the house yet!"

Smiling, she walked into the darkening hall towards the front door. A sudden chill, a feeling of unseen eyes watching, made her pause abruptly and turn, glancing up. Above her, in the dimness of the gallery, at the head of the long, curving staircase, she thought she saw a slight movement.

"Who's there?" she called, fear sharpening her voice.

Silence. Nothing but shadows. Jan hesitated a moment longer. Then, chiding herself for being overimaginative, she went out to join Ricky.

She wished now that they'd waited until morning to visit the manor, but they'd both been eager to come, even though they'd been driving for most of the day. Jan had spent a few days here as a child, but could only vaguely remember her godmother's home. Since then they'd only met when Mrs. Linton made one of her rare trips to London.

So Jan was as intrigued as Ricky when she turned the creeper-hung corner. She found him trying to unlatch a small, studded, wooden door. It stood beneath an enormous clock set high in the wall above them. The handle was stiff with disuse but eventually turned. They pushed the tiny door open and peered inside.

"Stairs! I'm going to climb up!"

"No, Ricky! Be careful! They might not be safe."

But Ricky's sturdy legs in their blue jeans were already fast disappearing up the narrow staircase.

A groan of disappointment floated down as Jan stood peering anxiously up.

"I can't get any further. The stair's missing. But I can see the back of the clock." Then: "If this was a belfry, there'd be bats . . . Oh!"

With a shriek, he thundered downstairs as, with a flutter of weblike wings, a small furry body swooped down from the roof. Missing the last few steps altogether, he landed in a heap at Jan's feet.

"Ricky! Are you hurt?"

He arose gingerly, obviously unharmed, covered with dust but beaming broadly.

"Well, we've discovered that they live in clock towers as well as belfries," he commented cheerfully as they closed the small door and stepped back on to the terrace.

Then he stopped so abruptly that Jan cannoned into him.

"Ricky! Whatever . . . ?" Her voice faltered as she met the dark, unfriendly eyes of a tall stranger who stood, legs astride, watching them. Beside him a large black Labrador stood as if waiting to pounce if they made the slightest move. Dark hair with more than a hint of a wave, strong nose and determined chin, the man looked to be in his mid-thirties. The blue of his sweater matched the even darker blue of rather deep-set eyes.

Handsome brute, thought Jan inconsequentially.

"You're trespassing, of course," the man remarked coldly. "Rather more than that, in fact. Breaking into private property can have serious consequences. You'd better go before I report you to the police."

Jan's small hands clenched with indignation. She straightened her shoulders and, drawing herself up to her full five-foot-three and stared back defiantly.

"No, you'd better go before I report you. This property is mine, so if anyone's trespassing, it's you!"

Surprise flickered in the man's eyes as he looked down critically at Jan's slim, denim-clad figure and the blonde hair flicked casually upwards and captured in a ponytail.

"Am I to assume that you're Mrs. Linton's goddaughter? Whatever was she thinking of to leave this barn of a place to an infant like you?"

Jan felt her temper rising as she tried to answer him calmly.

"I'm Jan Reynolds and this is my son, Richard." Her arm went round Ricky's small shoulders, as if to seek support. "And now perhaps you'll tell me what you're doing on my land, Mr. . . . ?"

"Adam Dexter's the name." He shifted slightly, his critical gaze sweeping across the terrace, the overgrown lawn and the weed-crowded flowerbeds.

"Your godmother let this place go downhill as she grew older. It was too much for her to manage." He frowned. "But she was determined to keep it. I offered several times to buy it from her—at a good price, too. I'll give you the same." Abruptly he added, "I'll tell my solicitor to get in touch with you."

Turning on his heel, he strode away, the dog following. They watched his departing back in silence for a moment.

"Well!" Jan breathed. "If that's a sample of our neighbors, it's just as well we won't be living here."

Ricky wailed with dismay. "But Mummy, it's smashing here. We can't sell it. Especially to him." And he looked with disgust along the path Adam Dexter had taken.

No, thought Jan fiercely, I certainly won't sell it to him.

Early the next morning her small red car nosed its way cautiously along the narrow Cornish lane which meandered alongside the rugged coastline. She'd decided that they might as well spend a few days at Chapters now they were here. And in any case, it would be cheaper than staying at the hotel in Trelmouth, the nearby market town where they'd spent the night.

The sky was clear and although the morning air was slightly sharp, the bare branches of the overhanging trees and the thick hedges lining each side of the lanes were beginning to show a hint of the green wealth to come. Jan felt extraordinarily lighthearted as she drove along. The clouds of unhappiness that had enveloped her since David's death seemed to have lifted for the first time. She'd never been a pessimist. But so many things had gone wrong, she'd almost begun to believe there was such a thing as a malicious Fate. Now everything had changed. If she sold Chapters, there'd be enough money to buy a small house and have a really good holiday, not to mention having savings in the bank at last. The only trouble was Ricky.

Ricky had lost his heart: it was clear from the way his small form perched on the edge of his seat, his eyes searching eagerly for the first sight of the narrow driveway, flanked by tall stone pillars, which led into the grounds of Chapters.

Suddenly the thicket bordering the narrow lane seemed to lunge towards them and disintegrate. A bombardment of scattered chips of wood and earth struck the car and rebounded in all directions. Next moment a big red tractor shot through the gap in the hedge and skidded across the lane in front of them. Jan jammed on the brakes. The car screeched to a shuddering halt, its nose inches away from the great wheels of the machine.

"Ricky! Are you all right?" She twisted anxiously to look at him.

"It's okay, Mummy. Lucky I had my seat belt on, though." Ricky's voice was small, then recovering quickly he hoisted himself upright in the seat. "What a mess!"

Reassured, but trembling with reaction, Jan reversed the car a few yards and drew into the side of the lane as a young man vaulted over what remained of the hedge and rushed up to them.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, peering anxiously through the window, his rugged face ashen under its tan. Shakily, Jan reassured him that no harm had been done.

"I left the tractor standing on a bit of a slope while I opened the gate." He ran his hand through thick fair hair, perspiration glistening on his brow. "The next moment it was hurtling down the field towards you. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Those were the worst few moments of my life!"

"Don't worry. We're not hurt." Jan managed a wan smile as her heart slowly stopped thundering beneath the soft pink wool of her jumper. "Your tractor caught all the damage. Luckily we were driving slowly because we didn't want to miss the entrance to Chapters."

The young man stared hard at her, then his face broke into a warm smile that showed attractively uneven white teeth.

"You wouldn't be Jan, by any chance, Mrs. Linton's goddaughter?"

She nodded, returning the smile, instinctively liking him.

"That's terrific! She used to talk about you frequently, but somehow I'd expected someone who was . . . well—" he grinned—"a bit older and more sensible-looking—and not half such a treat to look at!"

Level-headed she might be, but Jan still wasn't totally immune to a man's flattery, though she couldn't help laughing at his frank appraisal.

"And this must be your son, Ricky." He held out his hand and gave Ricky's a businesslike shake, then introduced himself as Paul Mallory. Gesturing towards a cluster of farm buildings perched on top of the hill overlooking the lane, he told them: "My father and I live up there. The farm belongs to him, and I help run it—but he's the boss. Why don't you both come up home and have some coffee?" He grinned, the color back in his tanned face again. "It's the least I can do after nearly killing the pair of you. And I've got to get help move that darned tractor anyway."

The three of them turned and gazed at the miscreant. Perched drunkenly on one side, its front wheels were hanging crazily over the low stone wall which encircled the picturesque, rocky harbor.

Jan opened the car door and Paul eased his sturdy frame into the front seat and directed Jan towards the farm. As the narrow track wound steeply uphill a panoramic view spread itself below. The sea surged incessantly against the rocks encircling the harbor; the weathered rooftops and chimneys of Chapters peeped like a glow of Autumn red through a wilderness of trees which seemed to grow almost to the water's edge.

As they drew up in front of the low, whitewashed farmhouse, a short, thickset man with graying hair came striding towards them.

"It's all right, Dad. I suppose you saw what happened?" asked Paul.

"You'll kill either yourself or someone else one of these days," snapped his father. "I don't know why you don't leave the driving to the men. Goodness knows I've told you often enough!"

A dull red flush mottled his rather heavy features. Mr. Mallory bore little resemblance to his son, but the concern in his eyes belied his angry words and expression.

He suddenly seemed to become aware of his silent audience and turned quickly to Jan and Ricky. Bushy gray eyebrows shot up in surprise as Paul introduced them.

"Well, well! Mrs. Linton kept very quiet about her pretty goddaughter. Not that I saw much of the old lady myself, even though we were such close neighbors." He glanced at Paul. "She and Paul were good friends, though. We'd been wondering whether you would come back to this country to settle things, or if you'd deal with everything through her solicitors."

"How about some coffee, Dad?" interrupted Paul. "And I'd better get a couple of the men to start shifting the tractor. We'll have to give those brakes a thorough overhaul." He smiled down at Ricky who was looking around the farmyard with wide-eyed interest. "How about coming and giving a hand?"

Ricky's acceptance showed in his wide smile even before his enthusiastic "Please." He followed Paul, to disappear into one of the large, well-kept barns which encircled the square, cobblestoned yard.

Mr. Mallory ushered Jan through the doorway into the farmhouse. A thin, capable-looking woman in a flowered overall came through an inner door in response to his call.

"This is Mrs. Robson, my housekeeper. She's kept the place running smoothly for Paul and me since my wife died a few years ago."

Mrs. Robson greeted Jan with a pleasant smile and a word of welcome before hurrying away to fetch coffee. Jan looked around her with pleasure as they entered a long, low-ceilinged room, comfortably furnished with leather armchairs, thick-piled carpet and heavy damask curtains. It seemed as if farming was a very lucrative business as far as the Mallorys were concerned: the whole farm breathed prosperity, and the house itself was almost luxurious.

"It's lovely to meet some friendly neighbors," she said as she sat down in an armchair pulled up beside the crackling log fire.

"You say that with feeling, as if you'd had experience of the other kind," commented her host, so she told Mr. Mallory about her confrontation with Adam Dexter.

He frowned as she related what had happened.

"I'm afraid Dexter was livid when Mrs. Linton refused to sell him the manor," he explained. "He owns Grey Towers Hotel, just along the road. It's a top-class place, and all he needs in order to make his fortune is Chapters and the land belonging to it."

Jan looked puzzled. "But why? It sounds as if he's got enough on his plate already." She smiled her thanks as Mrs. Robson came in with a tray and set coffee and biscuits quietly in front of them, leaving the room with a kindly nod.

Mr. Mallory explained that, although Grey Towers stood in its own grounds, one vital attraction was missing—the small beach and harbor were within a few hundred yards but the hotel had no access to them. The only path leading down there was private—the one which ran through the grounds of the manor.

"If Dexter owned Chapters he'd turn it into an annex for his hotel. And the beach would be his. It could bring him in a lot of business from people who like to spend their holidays fishing, or who own their own boats. This part of the country's very popular, y'know." Mr. Mallory looked serious. "Dexter wants the manor badly. And he's not a man to give up easily." It sounded almost like a warning.

He grunted, easing himself back against the cushions of his armchair.

"Never cared for the chap myself. Surly devil. Mrs. Linton didn't either—wouldn't sell to him under any circumstances, though I believe he put a lot of pressure on her."

He took a pipe from the pocket of his tweed jacket. Lighting a match, he held it to the tobacco in the dark-grained bowl and inhaled deeply.

"She'd have been wise to get rid of it, though. Bit of a white elephant that place really. Always has been."

He glanced casually through the windows, across the field where Paul and Ricky were to be seen climbing slowly uphill towards the farm.

"Come to think of it, I suppose I could always use a bit of extra land myself. And when Paul gets married one of these days, he'll be wanting another house. So I'd be quite interested to know your price when you've decided on it," he told Jan.

As they talked, Jan, too, was gazing through the windows. But instead of seeing fields and trees, she was remembering her son's small face, happy as he'd had little chance to be during the turmoil following David's death.

The idea that had been brewing in her mind ever since they'd left Chapters the previous night suddenly crystallized as Paul and Ricky came into the room. She put down her coffee cup and rose to her feet, wandering across to the window.

"I've decided what I'm going to do about Chapters," she announced.

Ricky stood completely still, his gaze almost fearful, as she paused. The others listened expectantly.

"I'm not going to sell after all. If Adam Dexter can make a living down here, and if he can see possibilities for the place, I can do exactly the same. Ricky and I will set up in the hotel business, too!"

A couple of days later Jan and Ricky drove to London. They'd spent busy hours in Cornwall before departing. Closer inspection confirmed that the manor seemed ideal for Jan's purpose. Upstairs she had discovered at least twelve fair-sized bedrooms, several with their own bathrooms, others which could easily be fitted with washbasins. The downstairs rooms were spacious, with beautiful views of the sea or the green fields and scattered woodland which framed the rear of the house. They decided that a small suite of rooms on ground floor would make two tiny bedrooms and a comfortable sitting room for their own use.

They called at the school in nearby Trelmouth and arranged for Ricky to start there as soon as they moved into Chapters. He'd be able to stay for school dinners, and they discovered that a local bus passed the manor gates, so he'd have no transport problems if Jan was too busy to take him. Ricky liked the look of the low-roofed modern school and Jan owned to herself that it would have been impossible to find anything he disliked about the whole venture.

On one of their rambles they'd pushed their way through the steep, bracken-strewn path that climbed sharply across the top of the headland which formed the other side of the long, horseshoe-shaped harbor. Shading her eyes, Jan had turned and looked back across the water to the slopes where Chapters sprawled, its windows glinting in the early spring sunshine. A little farther along the mainland a tall gray building rose above the crowded woodland where the first flecks of green sprinkled the bare branches.

"Look, Ricky. I think that must be Grey Towers Hotel, the place that man Dexter owns. No wonder he'd like Chapters—we've got a much better position, haven't we? Right opposite the harbor."

"Mmm! I bet he'll be mad about us deciding to live here," commented Ricky. They exchanged conspiratorial grins and wandered on.

On the very peak stood a small round building constructed from sturdy granite blocks.

"What do you suppose this is, Mummy?" queried Ricky, peering through the low arch that formed the door.

"I don't know. It looks almost like some sort of look-out post." Jan peered through the narrow, horizontal window that looked out to sea. "I don't think it's been built recently. Maybe Paul will know. We must remember to ask him."

"Paul's nice, isn't he, Mummy?"

"Yes, very," agreed Jan.

They'd met Paul briefly as they started their ramble and invited him to supper that evening. He arrived in good time, knowing they'd be eating early for Ricky's sake. He brought a breath of fresh country air into the manor as he stepped into the hall, even though he'd changed out of his working clothes into well-cut slacks and corduroy jacket. His thick fair hair had been brushed smoothly, though already stubborn curls were making determined efforts to break into their usual windblown disorder.

They stood by the door, looking across towards the headland while Jan and Ricky described where they'd walked that morning.

"What's the little round tower right on the top, Paul?" questioned Ricky.

"It used to be a look-out post years ago," Paul told him. "There's an old story that an underground tunnel runs from the manor, down towards the harbor, then climbs up to the tower. Of course you're bound to get tales of that sort whenever you've got an old house like this."

"D'you think it's true? Has anyone found the tunnel?" Ricky's brown eyes were eager, his body already poised for what Jan knew for a smiling certainty would be long searchings inside the house. Paul grinned, obviously sharing her thoughts.

"I don't recall anyone actually finding it, but it could be true. This was quite a coast for smugglers and wreckers in the old days, you know?"

"Come along in now, Paul," Jan urged. "Ricky will keep you out here answering questions all night, if I know him. Do you mind eating in the kitchen? It's the room we've used most since we arrived and it feels like home."

Paul said he didn't mind in the least, and they turned away from the gathering dusk into the softly lit hall.

"It's a good while since I was here last," he commented, following Jan into the warm kitchen where she started to prepare their meal. "I used to come and visit Mrs. Linton quite often."

"That was kind of you. She was probably rather lonely. And there weren't any close neighbors apart from you and your father." Jan deftly shook water from a crisp lettuce and arranged it in a glass bowl.

"Oh, I think she was quite happy with her own company," Paul said, leaning against the corner of the oak dresser. "She used to read a lot and walk around the grounds when the weather was fine. And Adam Dexter used to take her off to dinner at Grey Towers quite often."

"But I thought she disliked Dexter." Jan turned from the kitchen range, surprised. "I suppose he was trying to coerce her into selling. Oh! Drat this stove." She scrabbled for a cloth as the soup boiled over with a loud hiss and trickled in a brown stream onto the red tiles. "I'll get the hang of it if it kills me."

Paul laughed. "You'd better practice on me, I reckon, before you start killing off your guests!"

Jan shuddered. "Don't scare me—I need plenty of encouragement to stop me chickening out of the whole idea!"

"You can rely on me to encourage you to stay." Paul grinned as Jan's cheeks flushed pink and she turned away, momentarily embarrassed.

"Anyway, thanks for believing that I can make a go of it, Paul. Any moral support is more than welcome." She spread a gaily-checked gingham cloth on the table, and deftly laid out cutlery. It was flattering, she acknowledged to herself, to know that Paul felt attracted to her, but it was much too soon to think of becoming involved with him—even if she wanted to. Best to concentrate on getting Chapters on its feet as a paying proposition and just be grateful that she and Ricky had made a friend who firmly believed it could be done.

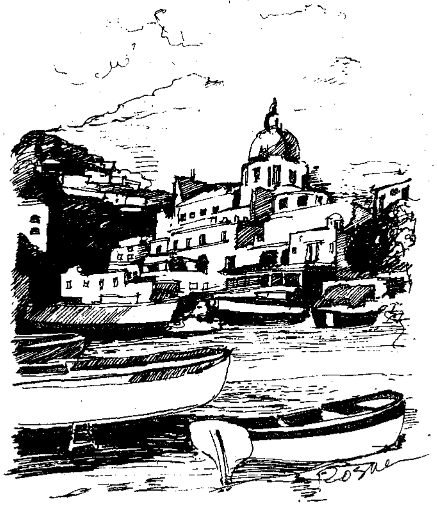
On the other hand, Mr. Spencer, with typical solicitor-like caution had been decidedly skeptical about the whole project when Jan went to tell him what she'd decided to do.

"But my dear young lady, you can't possibly manage all the work yourself. Keeping the grounds in good condition is a full-time job, quite apart from all the work in the house, and you would find hired labor terribly expensive. Mr. and Mrs. Linton used to be quite well-to-do people at one time, and it was horrifying to find how their fortunes had dwindled over the years."

Mr. Spencer shook his balding head, eyes glinting disapprovingly across the desk. Jan tried to reassure him.

"Mr. Mallory from the farm has offered to find a man to help me. A sort of general handyman who won't cost me a fortune." She laughed. "Even though he disapproves of the whole idea as much as you! But I'm determined to give it a try!"

When Jan and Ricky returned to London they drove straight to the small flat that belonged to Jan's friend, Louise. She and Louise had been at school together and had remained friends ever since, keeping in touch by letter during Jan's years abroad with David. As soon as she heard that Jan and Ricky were returning to England, Louise offered to put them up. Although quite small, her flat was comfortable and situated in a quiet, fashionable mews just a stone's throw from the bustle of the London traffic.



Louise had always been artistic—a talent which had secured for her a comfortable living illustrating children's books. Tall, blonde and willow-slim, she was strikingly attractive. Jan knew she never lacked men-friends, but she'd always seemed completely unimpressed by the thought of marriage.

"I'd get so bored, darling!" she drawled to Jan. "It might be honeysuckle and roses for a few months, then—wham!—I'd find myself dying to creep away into a corner and do some of my own work. And instead I'd be rushing between kitchen sink and a hot stove, with tiny feet pattering all around me!"

Jan had laughed at Louise's exaggerated picture of domesticity, but she recognized her friend's independent spirit. Privately she thought the right man, if ever he came along, would soon dissolve most of Louise's reservations about marriage.

Louise was almost as excited as Jan and Ricky when they described Chapters to her. She plumped firmly for keeping it and trying to run it as a business.

"I'm sure it won't take too much money to get it going in a small way," Jan said hopefully. "The cupboards there are full of beautifully-kept linen—sheets, tablecloths, the lot! And there's stacks of crockery and pots and pans. So I won't have to buy anything in that line." Her smooth brow wrinkled slightly as they sat talking in front of the electric fire in Louise's studio-cum-lounge. "My main problem will be paying the handyman's wages. But I can't manage without someone to do the heavy work and maintenance jobs inside the house."

Louise looked thoughtful. "How about me coming and helping out for a while? Maybe a couple of months or so. Just to get you started."

Ricky was whooping with joy. He flung his arms around Louise's neck, half strangling her in his enthusiasm.

"Auntie Louise! That'd be smashing! Wouldn't it, Mummy?"

Jan nodded, cautious relief lighting her gray eyes, even though she still looked uncertain.

"But, Louise—can you spare the time? What about your work?"

"No problem," Louise replied

briskly. "I'll bring it with me. I've just been commissioned to do some illustrations for a natural history book for children. So the countryside is just the place for me to get some ideas."

Jan felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It was only now that she dared admit that she'd been more than a little apprehensive about the task she'd set herself.

It hadn't helped her confidence to bump into Adam Dexter just before she left Cornwall. The mechanic at the petrol station had been checking the tires of Jan's car, when a large, streamlined station wagon drew in for gas. Jan drew in her breath sharply as she recognized the driver. Adam Dexter climbed out and walked across to her. Somehow she'd felt an inch smaller as each firm footstep brought him closer. She'd shaken herself mentally as he stopped in front of her, still unsmiling, formal in an immaculate brown suede jacket and pale trousers. Surely she wasn't afraid of the wretched man? But she instinctively drew in a deep breath and straightened her shoulders ready for battle at the sound of his deep, crisp voice.

"Good morning. You haven't replied yet to my solicitor's letter, I understand." He gazed down at her, his mouth a firm line in an autocratic face. "I hope you're not going to be too long before confirming the sale. I'd like to get organized well before the holiday season begins, and it can't be done in five minutes."

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave the manor out of your arrangements, Mr. Dexter," Jan informed him quietly, ignoring the inner quake of trepidation as she awaited his reaction. "I've just written to inform your solicitor that I shall be requiring it for my own summer visitors. So I won't be selling to you or anyone else."

A glow of satisfaction spread right through her as she watched his deep-set eyes sharpen with surprise, then anger.

"You're a little fool to think of taking that great place on," he gritted impatiently. "How on earth d'you think you'll be able to manage on your own? It's just not possible."

"Well, maybe one day you'll have the satisfaction of saying 'I told you so,'" retorted Jan. "But somehow I think you'll have a very long wait."

He hesitated as if about to say more, then, changing his mind, turned on his heel and strode to his car. Without waiting for petrol he accelerated rapidly away, gravel spraying up from the tires, leaving the mechanic gazing after him in bewilderment and Jan feeling slightly sick.

Exactly a week after first leaving Cornwall, Jan turned her car into the overgrown drive of the manor. It was almost like arriving for the first time, except that today she experienced a sudden rush of feeling that she recognized as homecoming. The car was absolutely laden. She and Ricky had few possessions in England; even so, the seats were piled high with suitcases, cardboard boxes and a clutter of carrier bags.

Ricky had elected to follow with Louise in her small two-seater sports car. They were calling at her publisher's on the way, so they wouldn't be arriving for another couple of hours.

Jan's eyes were bright with anticipation as she turned the final corner of the winding drive and drew up on the graveled terrace surrounding the house. She jumped out quickly, fumbling in her worn leather handbag for the heavy key to the front door.

She stepped forward to unlock it, then stopped, the key feeling suddenly cold and hard in the palm of her hand. The solid oak door was already open, creaking gently on its large black hinges as a sudden gust of wind blew across the wide terrace.

How could it be open? Who had unlocked it? A mental picture flashed through Jan's mind. She clearly remembered checking all the doors and windows before she left the manor the previous week. She remembered, too, the heavy thud as she closed the door behind her and stood there, savoring that this was her very own home.

Cautiously Jan pushed the door open wide and slipped quietly inside. She stood, listening. There was no sound to be heard. With greater confidence she walked across the polished floor and opened the door of the lounge.

"Oh no." Horrified, she gazed at the scene of destruction in front of her. The lounge was in turmoil. Chairs and tables had been overturned; drawers hung open, their contents scattered across the floor; every piece of furniture and every ornament had been disarranged.

They do not love that do not show their love.

William Shakespeare
The Two Gentlemen of Verona

Room after room told the same tale. Chaos, everywhere.

Too angry for tears, Jan ran upstairs. The bedrooms had been ransacked as thoroughly as the rooms below. Beds had been stripped of their covers, mattresses heaved onto the floor, cupboards and wardrobes stood wide open. Even the carpets had been lifted and flung haphazardly down again.

Tramps? Thieves? Jan shook her head. Tramps would have made themselves comfortable, not created havoc on this scale. And she had a feeling that theft hadn't been the purpose behind all this. Nothing appeared to be missing.

What should she do now? The police would have to be told, she supposed. Then all this mess would have to be cleared up. What a start to her venture.

Rubbing her hand wearily across her brow, Jan went into the library. She reached for the telephone and was about to start dialing when a slight sound halted her movements. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud; the room seemed to darken abruptly. Jan suddenly became uneasily aware of her isolation.

Her heart began to beat faster as she heard stealthy footsteps, then the creak of the front door being pushed open. Resisting a strong impulse to climb through the windows and run, Jan admonished herself for being such a coward.

Crossing the room quietly, she opened the library door and stepped into the hall.

Silhouetted in the main entrance stood the tall figure of a man. His face was in the shadows as he blocked the light from the hall.

Jan stepped back involuntarily, her pulses racing, as slowly and deliberately he began to move towards her.

* * *

"Mrs. Reynolds?" The man spoke at last as he came forward out of the shadows. "Pardon the intrusion, ma'am. I saw the front door open and thought I'd better take a look. Wondered if anyone was up to mischief." His voice had a soft Cornish burr.

"Stan Greaves is the name. Mr. Mallory from up the farm sent me."

His gaze swept past Jan to the chaos that showed through the open library door. "Seems like I'm too late—someone's been playing around already by the looks of things."

Jan's heart stopped its wild pounding as she began to relax.

"Too true," she agreed bitterly. "Someone's certainly 'done the place over' as they say. But it's strange—they don't seem to have been ordinary burglars. There's quite a lot of valuable stuff here, untouched."

"Youngsters up to mischief, I dare say." Stan Greaves hooked his thumbs through the wide leather belt around his waist and pursed his lips. "Empty house like this is sure a target." He grinned wickedly. "Nice comfortable roost for courting couples, too."

Jan laughed, then asked curiously, "You say Mr. Mallory sent you?"

"That's right, ma'am. Told me you'd be looking for a handyman to help get the old place together again. Seems you're going in for summer visitors?"

"I hope so," she agreed. "It's very kind of Mr. Mallory to send you. Have you known him long?"

Stan Greaves ran work-roughened fingers across his balding head. A tall, thin man with a slightly hooked nose, he had dark hooded eyes that almost disappeared among the deep lines in his face when he smiled. He was wearing old corduroys tucked into Wellington boots, an unbuttoned waistcoat and a checked shirt rolled above the sleeves. Around his scrawny throat a red handkerchief was knotted carelessly. He looked a bit of a villain, thought Jan with some amusement, but he must be all right if Mr. Mallory had recommended him.

"I've known the Mallorys for years," he explained. "Since young Paul was a nipper no higher'n my knee. I've worked for Mr. Mallory now and then, but I like to keep moving, so never stayed long. Just helped out in busy times." He lived in a cottage on the edge of Trelmouth, he told Jan. Being able to turn his hand to most things, he was often called upon by people when they needed a particular job done.

Stan wandered about the hall, stroking the linenfold paneling gently.

"Worked for Mr. Linton, too, a few years back. Nice gent he was . . . proper dreamer, though. Pity the way the old house has gone downhill. Still, if you'd care to have me help out for a while, we'd soon knock it into shape again."

"I'd be delighted to have you," Jan responded warmly. "We badly need help if we're to catch some of the early summer trade."

"It's a deal then. I'll start Monday if that's agreeable."

They discussed wages for a few moments and Jan was relieved to find that Stan didn't seem to price himself too highly. Though if the visitors don't come, I'll be hard put to it even to meet that amount, she thought wryly, accompanying him across the threshold, on to the terrace.

Jan watched him stride away down the overgrown drive, his waistcoat flapping in the fresh breeze from the sea. A distant roar sounded happily familiar and within moments a dusty blue sports car nosed its way along the drive and slid to a spluttering and noisy halt in front of Jan.

"Hi, there." Louise took off her dark glasses and unwound herself elegantly from behind the steering wheel. Ricky had already scrambled out and was running across the terrace to look down on the harbor.

"Jan, it's fantastic!" Louise was turning from side to side in delight. "What a gem of a place. We're going to have terrific fun here."

The three of them unpacked Louise's overloaded car and settled her into a large, pleasant room on the side of the house with windows that overlooked the farthest point of the headland where the little stone lookout tower was almost obscured by ferns and brambles.

Louise was completely enthusiastic as Jan and Ricky showed her the manor and wandered in the rambling grounds. She was not at all alarmed at the sight of the disorder wrought by the unknown intruder and set to with a will to help Jan put the house to rights again.

Next morning Jan was awakened early by a brisk tap at her door, a steaming cup of tea and the comment, "Come on, lazybones, we've got a living to earn."

Laughing, she sat up in bed and gratefully drank her tea before dressing and joining Ricky and Louise for breakfast. The kitchen felt really homey and even the cooking range seemed less hostile now Jan was getting the knack of lighting it and controlling the heat. A long scrubbed wooden table occupied the center of the room and one wall was entirely taken up by a huge oak dresser, its shelves colorful with patterned dishes. The windows, like the remainder in the manor, were latticed. Bright red curtains hung on each side, looped back to allow maximum light to penetrate. Jan thought it was a room where Mrs. Linton must have enjoyed spending time, because the red cushions on the wooden settle by the range were so well worn, and she herself often sank down on them, relaxing for a moment or two.

The two girls worked all day, planning each bedroom, listing those which needed decorating or refurnishing, deciding to move certain pieces of furniture from one room to another in order to make the best use of them and create comfortable quarters for each guest. They had a good forage through the linen and china supplies, too, and started making lists of extras that were needed. Luckily the cupboards were well stocked and, though the sheets and pillowcases were old, they appeared to be in good condition.

Ricky started school on Monday morning. He was slightly nervous but gave Jan a cheerful enough wave as she left him in the care of a friendly gray-haired teacher.

"Don't worry about him, Mrs. Reynolds. He'll soon settle down and make friends," she assured Jan, as she led the small captive inside, holding his hand firmly.

Comforted, Jan posted the envelopes containing the advertisement she had composed to various holiday publications, then drove back to Chapters, remembering as she did so that Stan Greaves had said he'd start work today.

Sure enough, he'd arrived and had already introduced himself to Louise.

"Mornin', ma'am," he greeted Jan.

"Hello, Mr. Greaves. I'm glad to see you." She gave him the bright smile that lit up her piquant face and often made people stop and take a second, longer look, recognizing her quiet attraction.

The three of them spent awhile discussing how best to tackle the work. Eventually it was decided that Stan should take his old van into Trelmouth and stock up with paints and building materials.

"I've a few handy connections, so I can probably get you a discount for all this stuff." He gave a knowing wink and laid a long finger beside his nose slyly, grinning. "Then I can get on with any plastering and woodwork that needs doing if you ladies don't mind having a go at the painting. How about that?"

"Sounds fine," agreed Jan, and so it was settled. That day set the pattern for the rest of the week. Each night the girls tumbled into bed, aching with fatigue but thoroughly satisfied with the way the rooms were beginning to take shape.

"Every muscle in my body is introducing itself to me," groaned Louise, massaging her protesting back. "I never realized I had so many."

"Well, it's Saturday tomorrow, so I reckon we deserve some time off," suggested Jan.

"Good idea," Louise brightened. "If the weather's fine I'll wander off with my sketch pad and get a few ideas for this children's book I'm supposed to be working on. It isn't urgent by any means, but I'll feel happier once I've got a few scribbles started."

Next morning dawned bright and clear so she packed a few sandwiches and a flask of coffee, and set off soon after breakfast. Jan and Ricky decided to go exploring in the woods that stretched far behind Chapters and the fields bordering the Mallory farm. They'd seen Paul briefly one morning when Jan drove Ricky in to school. He'd promised to call for coffee one day, to see how they were progressing.

"We're a bit short-staffed at the moment though, because one of our chaps broke his arm last week."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jan sympathized. "I feel I ought to offer to lend you Stan, especially as it's thanks to your father that we've got him."

"Stan? Stan Greaves, you mean?" Paul was clearly surprised.

"Didn't you know?"

"Not a word. And you say Dad sent him to you?" Paul frowned and shook his head slightly. "Oh, well, I suppose it's all right." He noticed Jan's inquiring, slightly bothered, expression and ruffled her hair with his strong brown hand.

"Don't look so worried. It's just that I've never particularly trusted the fellow. But I haven't actually heard anything against him, and he's been around for years, so he must be okay."

The flicker of doubt was still in Jan's mind as she remembered her conversation with Paul, even as she wandered among the trees with Ricky and enjoyed her day of freedom.

They'd reached a place where flat gray rocks rose one upon another, forming a series of steps. A tinkling cascade splashed like a miniature Niagara until it reached the lowest rock, then formed a brook scarcely two feet wide which ran swiftly along in front of them. Over the years the water had cut its way deeply into the ground and now ran clear and sparkling on a bed of smooth pebbles.

"Can we follow it uphill?" Ricky asked.

"I don't see why not. But let's eat first."

They sat down on the thick roots of an old oak on the bank of the stream and Jan unpacked their sandwiches. Eating in companionable silence, they watched the crystal-clear water swirl its busy way over brown and white pebbles, hurrying to reach its destination.

"What's that?" Ricky had tilted his head to one side and was listening intently.

A soft whimper came from just a few yards behind Jan, and suddenly into the clearing where they sat limped a large black Labrador.

"Why, that's Mr. Dexter's dog, isn't it?"

Jan frowned slightly. "I think so. He's certainly very similar. There's something wrong with his paw, poor thing. Look how he's holding it."

"Let's have a look," Ricky started to move forwards, but Jan motioned him to stay still.

"Better be careful," she warned. "We don't know if he's friendly or not. And if that paw is hurting, he's likely to be feeling a bit touchy, anyway. Let's take things slowly and see what happens."

She called softly to the dog. "Here, boy, what's the matter?"

He limped cautiously towards them.

"Give him a piece of sandwich, Ricky."

Ricky carefully broke off a corner and held it towards the dog.

"Good dog. Nice sandwich. Do you like ham and pickle?"

The dog took the food gently from Ricky and ate it, then moved closer and licked his outstretched hand.

"I think it'll be all right. He seems friendly. Hasn't he got beautiful brown eyes?" Jan moved closer. "Show me your paw, fellow. Let's see what you've done to it." She held out her hand and, talking soothingly all the time, coaxed the dog until it let her examine the wounded paw.

"Look, Mummy, there's a great big thorn in between the pads. Can we pull it out?"

"I think so. Look how red and angry it is. Soak your handkerchief in the water and we'll see what we can do."

Ricky obeyed immediately and they bent over the dog's paw, their faces absorbed. The Labrador gave a yelp.

* * *

Let no man think he is loved by any
When he loves none.

Epictetus
Fragments

"Got it!" Triumphantly Jan jerked her hand away and showed Ricky the huge thorn that had been embedded in the dog's foot. "Now bathe it gently. The cold water will soothe it. Poor old boy." She patted the dog's soft head and, after Ricky had bathed the injury, bound it firmly with the handkerchief.

"That will help till the tenderness wears off."

The dog gazed at them with limpid brown eyes and wagged his tail. He made no move to go away but lay close, head resting on front paws, watching as they finished their picnic.

Once they'd eaten all the food in the bag, Jan slung it over her shoulder again and they wandered on, following the stream uphill towards its source. They found themselves high on the crest of the hills eventually, where the trees thinned and a few sheep grazed on the springy turf. Far in the distance they glimpsed the sea and the rooftops of the manor. Over to the right reared the twin turrets of Grey Towers.

The black Labrador had accompanied them all this way, his makeshift bandage still firmly in place, and now Jan looked regretfully at her watch.

"I think we'd better start going back. We're a long way from home and the stream seems to have disappeared entirely underground."

They made their way downhill through the trees and eventually reached the glade where they'd first met the dog. His tail wagged. Turning for a moment to gaze at them soulfully, he gave a solitary "wuff" and was gone.

Louise had arrived home a few minutes before them. She'd just put on the kettle for a cup of tea, so Jan took cakes and biscuits from the cupboard and started cutting a crusty loaf into slices.

"Toast, everybody?"

"Not for me thanks," Louise said. Nonchalantly she added, "I've got a dinner date, so I'd better not eat too much."

Jan stared at her disbelievingly until she burst out laughing and struck an exaggerated pose, one knee slightly bent, one slender wrist flicked outwards like a shop window dummy.

"So there I am, walking along the clifftop, minding my own business. And I sit myself down and take out my sketch pad because there are a few yellow cowslips among the grass, not to mention the odd wagtail or two, and dozens of seagulls circling above." Her grin widened, her voice became ever more singsong. "Along comes this incredible hunk of a man and says 'Good afternoon. What are you doing?' or words to that effect. So I says 'drawing.' So he says 'Why don't you join me for dinner tonight?' So I says 'Yes.'"

Jan looked at her aghast. "Louise, you don't even know who he is. I think I must be old-fashioned, but do you think it's safe . . ." Her voice trailed off as Louise and Ricky, who had been exchanging conspiratorial glances, collapsed into giggles.

"Jan, you idiot." Louise squeezed her shoulders affectionately. "His name is Adam Dexter and he owns Grey Towers Hotel farther along the headland. Very respectable."

"Oh . . . I have met Mr. Dexter," Jan agreed stiffly. "Does he know who you are and where you're living?"

"Of course," said Louise, surprised. Wickedly she added, "I gather from a short stony silence when I told him, and a similar stony silence now, that you and Adam Dexter didn't exactly . . . hit it off?"

"He wants to get us out so he can buy Chapters."

"Oh, he told me that," Louise said airily. "But you refused and I'm sure that's an end to it. He asked if you'd like to come to dinner at Grey Towers as well. Suggested Ricky might like to sleep the night, so you wouldn't have any babysitting worries. Do come, Jan."

"No," said Jan. "I don't want to go."

And she wouldn't be moved. So, later that evening, Louise waved a slim hand through the library door before driving off in her sports car.

Ricky and Jan played snakes and ladders for a while, then struggled with a jigsaw puzzle. Once he'd gone to bed, a little later than usual because it was the weekend, Jan relaxed in the big armchair in front of the fire and fell asleep.

She awoke to the sound of voices and struggled upright in the chair, blinking, as Louise came into the room, followed closely by none other than Adam Dexter. He looked amused at Jan's discomfiture as she hastily smoothed back the vagrant curls that had escaped from her ponytail.

"Good evening, Mrs. Reynolds."

Jan inclined her head, lost for words.

"Adam brought me home because I had trouble getting my car started," Louise explained. "I think the accelerator cable is sticking, so I had to leave it at the hotel."

"But only after you'd given it a very knowledgeable once-over," he commented with dry amusement. "Are all your friends as talented as Louise, Mrs. Reynolds?" Adam looked at Jan critically, with a faint twist of his lips, as if to imply that he couldn't imagine how the two girls could be so different.

"Louise is an exception," Jan told him baldly, wishing he'd go away and not tower over her, so darkly elegant in his well-cut dinner jacket. She felt at a complete disadvantage as she looked at him, but had to admit he made a striking escort for Louise. She was looking her most attractive in a deep blue silk evening blouse, with tightly-fitting trousers of crushed velvet. Her blonde hair, swathed upwards into a smooth chignon, looked as immaculate as if she'd only done it minutes, rather than hours, ago.

"You and Louise are certainly very different," Adam commented in what seemed to Jan less than flattering tones. "The tiger and the dormouse." He shook his head as Louise offered him coffee. "Thanks, no. I'll be getting back now I've delivered you safely."

He turned to Jan, his dark face expressionless. "I understand you're still determined to pursue this crazy scheme of yours. Don't forget Louise won't be here forever. How will you manage when she's gone?" One black eyebrow lifted slightly, his tone became mocking. "Still, I've no doubt you'll change your mind after a few months of struggling along on your own."

He didn't wait for an answer, just nodded briefly to Jan and left the room, Louise following in his wake.

Jan listened to their voices in the hall, annoyed to find her heart hammering. Why did the wretched man always have the knack of upsetting her? He looked at her and spoke to her just as he would to a child. A silly child, at that. She felt more conscious of her lack of inches and his saturnine ruthlessness every time she saw him. Was he the intruder who'd ransacked the manor? Had there been a hidden threat just now? What made him so sure she'd go? Jan shivered slightly. Dexter looked like someone who'd secure anything he set his heart on. But he wasn't going to have Chapters.

Louise came back into the room, her green eyes bright.

"Now that's what I call a real man," she asserted, sinking down onto the couch like a contented cat, and slipping off her delicate black sandals. She caught Jan's amused glance and shook a slim white finger admonishingly. "As for you . . . Why on earth do you let Adam get at you. You shrank to nearly half size when you saw him."

"Not always."

"No, of course, I'd forgotten. Ricky told me how you'd turned the tables and accused Adam of trespassing." She looked across at Jan teasingly. "You ought to stand up to him more often . . . do you good."

"Too much effort," replied Jan sleepily. "Did you enjoy your evening?"

"Lovely. It's a very comfortable hotel, not at all chromium-plated. Sort of country club atmosphere. All the furnishings and decorations are really tastefully chosen. And as for the food . . . out of this world." Louise rubbed her flat stomach reminiscently. "I must have put on pounds." She saw Jan's lips quirk in disbelief, looked down at her own wafer-slim figure, and had to laugh.

Two weeks later the two girls decided to drive into Trelmouth because Stan said they'd enjoy shopping there on market day. They set off in Jan's car, though, as Louise put it, "With a shopping list like ours, we really need a freight wagon."

Bustling with life, the town had been built in medieval times on each bank of the narrow river that ran parallel to the crowded High Street. Most people were converging on the marketplace, so Jan and Louise parked as near to it as possible, though with difficulty, and headed in the same direction.

They attracted a number of glances because they made an attractive pair. Louise's long-legged slenderness set off to full advantage her quietly expensive suede jacket, brown skirt and matching court shoes. Jan, too, had discarded her jeans and was wearing a trim-fitting green corduroy jacket with a green-and-white check skirt and brown brogues that showed her neat ankles. For once she loosened her hair and it swung, a silky blonde cloud, around her small, heart-shaped face.

Inside the main cattle market there was an indescribable din. The pens were full of animals, pushing against each other, loudly proclaiming their disquiet. Jan and Louise hoisted themselves onto stout metal bars overlooking the auction ring and watched, enthralled, as the auctioneer's singsong monologue invited bids and his helpers prodded the unfortunate cattle around the ring.

"Hello, Jan. Don't nod your head or you'll find you've bought a couple of heifers." Paul Mallory stood beside them, a broad smile on his pleasant face. A few yards beyond him, talking to one of the older farmers, stood his father.

"Enjoying yourself?"

Jan nodded enthusiastically, her face glowing. "It's fascinating." Then she remembered. "Paul, you haven't met my friend, Louise Graham."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Graham."

Louise nodded coolly and Paul let fall his half-extended hand. He beckoned to Mr. Mallory who had just finished his conversation and was obviously wondering where his son had disappeared to.

He came across and greeted Jan briskly. "Good morning, Mrs. Reynolds, I hear you're doing great things down at Chapters."

Jan introduced Paul's father to Louise, then thanked him for sending Stan Greaves to her.

"I rang to thank you personally but you were out, so Mrs. Robson said she'd tell you what a wonderful help he is."

"Oh, Greaves is a good worker," agreed Mr. Mallory. "I thought he'd be just the chap for you because you'll certainly have your hands full."

Paul interrupted him. "Look, why don't we have lunch together? Dad usually meets up with his own friends and I have a meal in the White Hart with some of mine. I'd be glad if you'd join me."

"That would be lovely," Jan accepted for both of them, casting a sideways glance at Louise's unresponsive features.

"Fine. Shall we meet outside the White Hart at, say, one o'clock?"

With a wave and a smile he was gone, Mr. Mallory raising his tweed hat and wishing them a brief farewell also. The contrast between father and son seemed even greater today, but Mr. Mallory's occasional brusqueness probably stemmed from hard years spent in building up the farm to the thriving business it had become, years that allowed little time for cultivating the social niceties, Jan supposed.

An hour later she was half wishing she'd never agreed to the lunch date with Paul. Louise was uncharacteristically silent and her coolness seemed to unsettle even Paul's natural good humor. She spoke in monosyllables when forced to speak at all. And even Paul dropped a few remarks about how she'd be longing to get back to big city life after a few weeks among 'the country yokels.'

It was almost a relief when a voice spoke above their heads.

"May I join you for coffee?"

"Adam. Glad to see you." Paul beckoned the waitress and ordered coffee for all of them, then turned with a welcoming smile to Adam Dexter as he sat down opposite Jan. "You've met Jan and Louise, I expect?"

Adam inclined his dark head gravely. "Yes. I see Mrs. Reynolds has fewer qualms about accepting your invitations than mine. I must discover the secret of your appeal."

Jan flushed, remembering that she hadn't even attempted to make excuses for her refusal to dine at the hotel with Louise. Paul looked at her questioningly, then, sensing her embarrassment, started talking to Adam about the day's market, in terms that showed he knew the other to be well versed in farming matters and respected his judgment.

I don't see why the beastly man even has to know about cows and sheep, thought Jan crossly. No wonder he acts as if he's kingpin round here, and I'm an ignorant ninny!

Her thoughts showed clearly on her expressive face and Adam, looking across the table with some amusement, asked, "Touch of indigestion, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Too much of something, for sure," she snapped in return, then flushed at her own rudeness.

He said nothing but immediately turned his head away and started talking to Louise. Today he was wearing a well-cut tweed jacket, light brown trousers and a fawn roll-neck sweater. Some men might have looked too immaculate for a country market, but on Adam Dexter the clothes sat casually and seemed completely right.

Jan, while she was listening to Paul, overheard Adam invite Louise to the hotel for dinner again one evening the following week. She noticed with a certain wryness that he didn't include herself and Ricky in the invitation this time.

Good. I'm glad he'd got the message, she thought defiantly and gave Paul such a dazzling smile that for a moment he stopped talking, disconcerted, before completing his sentence.

Jan was a sound sleeper and the unusual exercise she'd had since moving into Chapters made her drop into bed most nights with a healthy fatigue that rendered her unconscious until the following morning. That night for some reason she felt restless, sleeping a little, then waking again. Eventually she gave it up as hopeless and, getting out of bed, slipped feet into soft mules, then wrapped her dressing gown around her. Perhaps she'd settle down if she made a hot drink and read for a while.

The moon was shining brightly, throwing slivers of pale gold across the corridor as she went towards the kitchen. Into Jan's mind slipped the memory of that first visit to the manor when she had so distinctly sensed someone watching her from the gallery. Suddenly nervous, she moved more quickly, her hand stretching out towards the lightswitch halfway along the corridor, where a door opened on to the side of the house. Beside it, a narrow window overlooked the row of old stables, disused for many years.

Jan checked as a pinpoint of light showed from the stable at the far end. Her skin prickled as she stood uncertain, watching. Common sense told her that probably Stan had left a lamp burning when he'd finished work. She knew he kept tools and building materials there, plus the tins of paint they were using for decorating. She'd better go and put out the light. Being a paraffin lamp, it could easily cause a fire if an animal or bird got into the stable and knocked it over.

Stan hadn't been at all happy when Jan told him her plans for the stables.

"Maybe we'll be able to afford ponies for the visitors one of these days, or at least one for Ricky," she'd argued. "But until then, without altering the actual structure, we can easily convert them into several decent garages. We ought to have at least a few for visitors' cars."

The stables were built of the same warm red brick as the manor and seemed in good condition apart from the low-tiled roof that badly needed repair. The wooden doors, too, were broken and hanging off their rusty hinges. Inside, clutter was piled high, stored there over the years and forgotten.

"We'll have to turn all that stuff out and go through it as soon as we've time," she'd told Stan. He'd tackled all their other tasks so willingly, it was an unexpected setback to find him unhelpful.

"Time's the word, I'm thinking," he'd commented dourly, obviously displeased. "It's an army you'll need to work on that lot. A right dirty job it'll be. No doubt about it."

Now Jan opened the heavy door quietly and stepped out into the moonlight. Her face a pale blur in the soft light, lifted towards the sky as she drew in deep breaths of delicious night-scented air. There was a tang of the sea about it, salty and fresh, but there was, too, the softer pine-scented drift of the woodlands and its secret animal world.

Jan clutched her dressing gown around her and shivered as a stray breeze moved the curls at her temples. What was she doing, mooning around here in the middle of the night? She smiled at herself and moved towards the thin streamer of light which threw its beam across the ground, almost reaching the old walls of the house.

Jan tensed. Surely she could hear the low murmur of voices? Or was it the sea, brushing against the black rocks in the harbor? She listened again. Yes, it really was the sound of human voices, speaking quietly. And it came from the stable at the end of the row, where the light was.

Jan stood undecided. Should she wake Louise. No, that was silly. If she troubled anyone, it ought to be the police. But first she'd better find out more. It was probably just a couple of tramps bedding down for the night. They'd be gone in the morning. Her foot cracked on a twig, and she stood still, nerves tingling. There was no sound now, but the light was still there.

Maybe she'd imagined it all. It was easy to let your mind run riot in a place like this, especially in the hours of darkness. Still silence. She moved forwards and, gaining confidence, reached the door of the stable. The lamp was burning dimly on a shelf at the back.

Come on, Jan! Don't be such a coward, she scolded, opening the door wide.

A shadow stirred behind her. As Jan turned swiftly, something hit the back of her neck. She crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Jan stirred uneasily as strong arms lifted her. She gave a little groan, for the movement made an agonizing pain shoot through the back of her head. Opening her eyes to the dawn shadows she recognized the man who held her closely against his chest.

Adam Dexter. She raised her head from his shoulders and tried to protest, but the effort proved too great and she sank back with a small sigh.

Jaw set hard, his firm lips formed a straight line that scarcely moved. "Which is your room, Jan? Can you tell me?"

She gestured weakly towards the soft light glowing from the far side of the main hall. Adam carried her into the simply-furnished bedroom and laid her onto the narrow divan, adjusting the bedside lamp so that it didn't shine in her eyes. Without speaking, he took her head between his hands and probed with unbelievably gentle fingers. When they reached the base of her skull she winced with pain and shrank away. Carefully pushing aside her tumbled hair, he examined the wound closely, cursing softly under his breath.

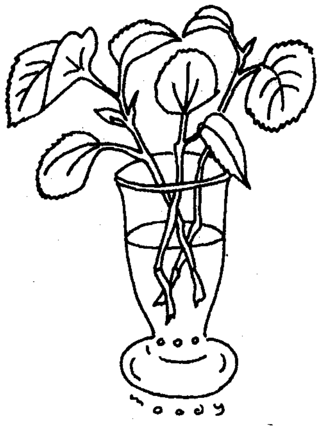
"I'm going to call a doctor. Where's your telephone, Jan?" Adam's voice was clipped, his face tight with anger.

Jan opened her eyes and started to sit up, despite his restraining hand.

"No. Please. I'm just a bit stunned, that's all."

"Don't be a little fool." His tones were quiet and deadly. "It's obvious someone's taken a swing at you. I don't think you need stitches, but there might be some concussion. You need a doctor."

"I really don't want to send for him." Jan's voice was tremulous, her eyes pleading. "Ricky sleeps in the next room and I don't want to risk waking him. He'd be so frightened if he knew what's happened." She clutched Adam's arm in her anxiety, and he looked down at her small hand, an odd, unreadable expression in his eyes. "Don't forget I'm all the family he has. There's no one else."



Jan's voice trailed away as Adam settled her back on to the pillow and stood up.

"You win. But I'll come and check how you're feeling tomorrow. Don't doubt that for a moment!" Abruptly he strode across the room, shutting the door behind him.

Jan lay back and closed her eyes. A sick throbbing ran along every bone in her head. She scarcely bothered to wonder what Adam had been doing outside Chapters in the middle of the night. But it was a question that would return to tease, she knew, when she could think straight again. She didn't even feel frightened as she wondered briefly who had attacked her. All she knew was that, for the moment, she felt safe. The rest could wait.

A movement beside the bed made her open startled eyes. Adam was back, carrying a tray which contained a steaming beaker and small bowl of water. A towel was slung over one arm.

He sat on the bed beside Jan, and turning her carefully away from him, started bathing the back of her neck. The cold water was incredibly soothing and she lay compliant, near to tears as waves of reaction began to flood over her. At last Adam drew her towards him, dark blue eyes serious.

"Does that feel better?" He gave a muffled exclamation as her gray eyes filled with weak tears and, as he gathered Jan securely in strong arms, with a despondent sigh she released the scalding flood against his chest. When the helpless quivers shaking her body began to subside, he murmured, "Don't cry any more. It's all over." His lips brushed the tangled curls. "Care to tell me what happened? Or leave it till tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." Jan gulped and gratefully took the crisp white handkerchief he proffered. What a sight she must look. Tear-stained cheeks, reddened eyes, and the old blue dressing gown that she'd worn since Ricky was a baby.

"I'm sorry." She drew a shuddering breath and swallowed fiercely. "I'm so sorry to be a nuisance."

"Oh, Jan." Adam sounded impatient. "I'll admit you're a nuisance." His voice softened. "But you're many other things, too." Reaching for the beaker he said, "Drink this before it gets cold."

"What is it?" She looked suspicious.

"Nothing sinister." A slight smile lit his face, showing a glimpse of white teeth. "Just milk with a dash of brandy. It'll help you sleep." The smile faded. "I've had a good look outside. You'll be safe now."

"Adam . . ." She looked up at him, but already sleep was laying soothing fingers on eyelids that were drooping with tiredness.

"Tell me tomorrow," he interrupted quietly but with a firmness that she was in no state to disobey. "Now drink up and go to sleep."

Jan made no protest when, once she'd finished the milk, he replaced the beaker on the tray and tucked in the bedcovers firmly. Moving quietly to the door he commanded, "Switch off your light," and, even as she did so, left the room.

Jan slept restlessly through the remaining few hours of dawn, awaking to a gray day and a splitting headache. She felt only a little better after bathing and dressing. Louise and Ricky didn't seem to notice her silence as they ate their own breakfasts and neither commented on her lack of appetite. Louise was taking Ricky into school today so they hurried off as soon as they'd finished.

Fred Cooper, the postman, had a bundle of letters for Jan when he drove up in his red van.

"Looks like you've got a few bookings," he greeted her cheerfully, ruddy face beaming.

Jan, amused, took the letters from him. She was getting accustomed to the fact that everyone in the scattered community took a friendly interest in everybody else's business and didn't even dream of concealing it.

Going back indoors she poured another cup of coffee and swallowed a couple of aspirin before looking at the post. He was right, as usual. There were six letters from people who were interested in the advertisement and wanted more details, so they'd better be answered quickly. Her spirits lifted. It was an encouraging start, anyway.

Soon she ought to advertise for a local woman to help with the cleaning, preparing the food and so on, because she and Louise wouldn't be able to cope with it all if they were lucky enough to get plenty of bookings. Jan smiled. No doubt Fred already had someone lined up for the job, so she needn't worry too much.

Stan Greaves was busy tiling a small room upstairs which had been converted into a bathroom. And again Jan thanked her lucky stars that Mr. Mallory had sent him to help out. She peeped in to see how the work was coming along.

"You're getting on fine, Stan," she praised. "This will look really attractive."

He grunted, but was obviously pleased as he stepped back beside her while she admired the half-finished wall.

Jan had discovered that Stan was a strange, moody sort of man. She couldn't ask for a better worker, and he was oddly likable even though she knew full well that, away from Chapters, he was up to all sorts of tricks. He had a droll sense of humor that she found irresistible and she often found herself dissolving into gales of laughter when he talked about some of his outrageous antics. Whether they were fact or fiction she didn't know, but she had an idea they often contained an element of truth, vividly embroidered.

At other times he seemed withdrawn, almost morose, and Jan found it was best then to leave him to his own devices. In spite of everything, she trusted Stan because, without being conceited, she had a feeling he'd grown to like her and hoped she'd make a success of things.

Today she was glad he wasn't in a talkative mood, and she left him and set about her own tasks.

The afternoon was dull and gray, with a light wind gentling the treetops. Jan decided to work outdoors in an tempt to clear her head. The nape of her neck was still painfully sore, especially if she moved her head sharply, but the sick throbbing she'd awakened with had subsided into a dull ache across her forehead and temples. Worse than the physical discomfort, though, were the thoughts tormenting her mind. Strange things began happening ever since she'd first set eyes on Chapters. She had to make herself believe they were sheer coincidences. Or was something more sinister behind them?

She decided to take the wheelbarrow and some gardening tools around to the front wing of the house. The flowerbeds there were badly overgrown so she might as well spend the afternoon digging them thoroughly and discovering just what plants and shrubs still survived, hidden as they were among the creepers.

The wheelbarrow was piled high with weeds and brambles by the time a familiar station wagon turned into the drive and slid to a smooth halt.

Jan's nerves knotted and her heart gave a treacherous leap as Adam strode towards her.

"You must be crazy, you idiot," he exclaimed, deep-set eyes furious. "I thought you'd have the sense to rest."

Taking her chin between tanned fingers he raised Jan's face towards his. Lilac shadows smudged gray eyes that mirrored the dull ache in Jan's head and the disquiet of her thoughts.

"Little fool. A place this size is always going to attract tramps, burglars, every sort of vagrant you can imagine. Why don't you give it up?"

Jan shook her head fiercely, then winced, half closing her eyes against the knifelike pain caused by the sudden movement.

"That does it." Adam seized her wrist, bundled her not ungently into the car and, sliding into the driving seat, accelerated almost recklessly down the drive.

"Where are you taking me?" Jan faltered, wondering what she'd done to bring down this onslaught upon her defenseless head.

"I'm doing what I should have insisted on doing last night." His mouth hardened. "You're going to have a check-up at the hospital. I'm taking you in myself to make sure you don't skip out through the back door. You might be walking about with a fractured skull . . . anything. And then I find you outside digging ditches."

They drove in silence and swiftly reached the cottage hospital on the outskirts of Trelmouth, where Jan was quickly whisked away for an X ray. Adam was leaning against the car when she finally emerged.

"Well?"

"'Well' is the word," Jan told him defiantly. "No fracture, just a big bruise that will hurt for a while, then go away."

"Now tell me exactly what happened last night," he commanded as the car turned onto the main road a few minutes later.

Jan related everything she'd seen and heard the previous night and Adam listened without comment, a deep frown creasing his forehead.

"What I can't understand is how you came to find me there," she concluded bravely, taking the war into the enemy's camp Hands clasped tightly together, she waited.

Adam glanced sideways, a slight smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

"I was trespassing," he confessed. "I often use the path that runs from Chapters to the harbor when I go night fishing. It saves quite a bit of time and effort."

Jan suddenly remembered dark jeans tucked into seaman's boots and the heavyknit sweater Adam had been wearing last night.

"It gave me quite a shock, I can tell you, when I found you lying outside." His voice was harsh. "Luckily you were only unconscious—but you might have been dead."

As they reached the manor Louise came out to meet the car.

"Hi. Where've you two been?" She turned and looked at Jan who had quietly slipped out of her seat without waiting for Adam's help. "Feeling all right, love?"

"No better than she should, considering someone hit her on the head last night," Adam interrupted grimly. "I dare say she didn't think to tell you."

Jan turned, a swift protest on her lips, but Adam forestalled the angry words with a gesture of his hand.

"It's only right that Louise should know. Next time you try wandering in the night, take her with you or, better still, a policeman."

Louise was looking bewildered, so Adam swiftly told her what had happened. Her horrified face made Jan insist that no harm had been done. Darting an angry glance at Adam she said, "There was no need to worry you, Louise."

Completely unrepentant, Adam went on smoothly, "Moving to more pleasant things—I wondered if you'd care to come sailing next Saturday if the weather's right?" He was looking at Louise.

Jan, standing to one side, forgotten, felt a sudden stab of pain, but this time it was in her heart, not her head.

Louise was accepting eagerly and with a swift "Be seeing you," and a sharp sideways glance at Jan—"Good-bye for now, infant. Don't do any sleepwalking tonight,"—he drove off. Numbly, she went indoors, her mind full of conflicting thoughts.

Adam was so obviously attracted to Louise. Why else would he keep seeking her company? He was very much a man despite the fact that he was still unmarried. But most men eventually felt the urge to settle down and raise a family, and he'd be no exception. Adam's mate would be carefully selected, for he'd need a wife with intelligence and poise, a woman who would be an asset to him in his business. Jan had no doubt that he was an ambitious man who meant to go far. Who better to help him than Louise?

Jan wondered about Louise's feelings. Men had always found her attractive and she seemed to enjoy their company, preferring safety in numbers to the more meaningful attentions of any one special person. But no one could deny Adam Dexter was something rather different. Once he set his mind on possessing a certain woman, Jan was fairly sure he'd meet with little resistance—not even from someone as independent and self-assured as Louise.

She didn't stop to analyze her own feelings about Adam, but when Paul called unexpectedly that evening and invited her to a barn dance at the end of the week, she found herself accepting eagerly. The knowledge that a man wanted her own company and showed that he found her attractive poured soothing balm on feelings that were undeniably sore. Why they should be so, she hardly knew. Maybe it was just a feeling of being someone of little significance when Adam invited Louise to go sailing.

Jan had loved sailing with David; it would feel good to be dancing on the waves again, the wind tugging white sails, fresh breezes blowing away any last cobwebs of unhappiness. But no, Adam would be sharing it with Louise instead.

"The dance is being held at a farm about eight miles away," Paul explained. "I thought you might feel like a break. Your friend Louise can look after Ricky for the evening, can't she?" His voice held a faint tinge of reserve, or could it be criticism, as if doubting that Louise would be willing or capable of performing even that simple task. Jan hurried to tell him that it wouldn't be necessary anyway.

"Ricky's been invited to a party on Saturday afternoon and his friend wants him to stay the night, so there's no problem."

Paul's face brightened. "That's great! I'll pick you up about eight. All right?"

Paul's invitation warmed Jan's heart whenever she thought about it during the remainder of the week. Each fresh confrontation with Adam Dexter seemed to undermine her confidence, not only regarding the success of the manor as a business venture but, even worse, casting doubts on her ability to appeal to anyone as a woman. Yet David had married her, and Paul was obviously attracted to her, so she must possess some feminine attributes, surely? What did it matter anyway if Adam chose to treat her as a child?

The following Saturday dawned clear and bright, with cottonwool tufts of cloud moving slowly across a deep blue sky.

Adam called for Louise just after breakfast, so Jan kept out of sight in the kitchen until they drove away. Early in the afternoon she delivered a thoroughly excited Ricky to his friend's party and watched him join the crowd of small boys, carrying a birthday present in one hand and overnight bag in the other.

Later, after a leisurely bath in water scented with foaming suds, she dressed slowly for the barn dance. Paul had told her it would be an informal affair so, after some thought, Jan decided to wear a crisp white blouse, the low drawstring neckline edged with broderie anglaise. Her black skirt was ruffled around the hem with a broad band of vivid red, green and yellow. Suddenly excited, she waltzed around her bedroom enjoying the silken rustle as it swirled above slim legs, and the almost forgotten sensation of feet shod in dainty thin-strapped sandals.

When Paul arrived Jan was ready and her spirits lifted even more as he gave a long wolf-whistle.

"You'll be the prettiest girl there tonight." His eyes told her the same. "Just don't forget I'm the bloke you came with."

As they drove along the winding country lanes Paul pointed out the boundaries of his father's fields.

"He's terribly proud of the farm, isn't he, Paul? I got the impression he'd be interested in expanding even more if I ever sold Chapters."

"Yes, he's made his life revolve around it . . . and mine, too." Paul's voice held an odd note that made Jan turn her head towards him swiftly, but his face in the dusk revealed nothing.

"What would you have liked to do if you hadn't been a farmer, Paul?"

"I can't imagine a life that didn't involve farming," he reflected slowly. "But I must admit I've got a hankering to spread my wings a bit." He was quiet for a moment, then started telling her about an old schoolfriend, Bill Seymour, who owned a dairy farm in New Zealand, and was doing well. "We've kept in touch for years and now Bill's asked me to go into partnership with him. Says the place is growing so much he could do with help and he'd like it to be me."

"Couldn't you go, if that's what you really want?" Jan asked.

"Dad was too upset at the idea." Paul frowned into the evening shadows. "And to be fair, he's put so much into the farm, I can't just clear off and leave him if he's so insistent that I stay. It might be easier if only I could use a few of my own ideas here, but he's determined to keep complete control."

"Has the farm been in your family long?"

"Years. That's half the trouble. It belonged to my grandfather and, when he died, it was left equally to his two sons, Dad and his elder brother George. The two of them couldn't get on together—never had, even when they were kids—so Dad cleared out and went into the stockbroking business."

Paul slowed down at a narrow crossroads and turned right, to bump along a twisting cart-track.

"Dad refused to sell his share in the farm, and when Uncle George died about ten years ago he managed to buy out his sister-in-law—George's wife, that is—and took over the whole business. He must have worked like a maniac to earn the money he needed. That's why it'd be impossible for me to go away, even for a few years, without his blessing. He staked so much on getting the place."

Jan was silent, for she could see no way out of the problem. Mr. Mallory had struck her as a hard-headed business man, but she didn't doubt that he loved the farm and was intensely proud of it. Still, it seemed wrong that Paul's life should be dominated by his father, especially if he himself wanted something different.

The barn dance was in full swing when they reached the end of the bumpy track and found themselves in a paved yard belonging to yet another farm.

Formal entertainments in this remote area were few, almost nonexistent in fact. But now that Jan was getting to know the people who lived here, she'd discovered they created their own social life—and plenty of it. Paul had told her that the family running tonight's barn dance, for instance, often used one of their buildings for a get-together like this.

Inside the barn long wooden benches and tables formed by upturned barrels were ranged around the walls. On the makeshift stage a four-piece band was playing with incredible zest. Paul slipped his arm about Jan's slender waist and whisked her gaily into the center of the crowded floor. The band, clad in check shirts and jeans, didn't only play noisily, but kept the music going from one tune to another in what could only be described as a marathon romp. When everyone finally collapsed, gasping, at the end of the dance, Jan accepted gratefully the long cool drink Paul placed in her hand.

He introduced Jan to so many people her head was reeling in an attempt to remember all their names. They were obviously curious about her but warm and friendly, treating Jan as if she'd belonged for years. She danced time and time again with a variety of partners and eventually sank pink-cheeked and breathless onto one of the benches to sip her drink and recover.

The evening's fun ceased the moment Jan caught sight of a tall dark man dancing close to an attractive blonde on the far side of the floor.

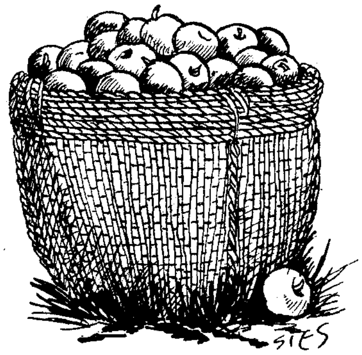
"Adam and Louise!" Jan, dismayed, didn't realize she had spoken aloud until Paul, following her gaze, commented, surprised, "You didn't tell me they were coming."

"I had no idea," Jan told him, feeling a sudden chill, wishing desperately that the other two had chosen to spend their evening anywhere but here.

"They're coming over. My goodness, Louise is dressed for the occasion," Paul observed.

He hadn't bothered to lower his voice, and Jan noticed with distress the slight flush that filmed Louise's smooth cheeks. Jan was upset by Paul's rudeness, too. It was so unlike his usual pleasant manner and seemed to be directed only towards Louise, because he was obviously immensely popular with all the people here tonight.

"Good evening," Adam sat beside Jan. "I'm glad to see you're fully recovered."



"I'm fine, thanks," Jan replied in a brittle voice. She turned away from his sharp sidelong glance as a wave of shock swept across her. Unexpected and overwhelming the realization had dawned that she was jealous. Jealous of Louise. The sight of Adam holding her friend in his arms as they danced had sent piercing shafts of longing through her heart. I understand now what they mean about Cupid's darts, she thought irrelevantly, as her hands instinctively clasped themselves together as if to fend off the pain.

How could such a thing happen when there was so much antagonism between herself and Adam? She knew at this moment that, deep down, she'd been fighting his dark attraction since the day they'd met. Her flesh tingled and all her senses came to life when Adam was there. His arms had been a refuge the night she was attacked, and she hadn't felt warm and secure since he'd taken them away.

Louise was explaining that she and Adam had enjoyed a lovely day sailing. The dance was a last-minute idea.

"And a good one." Her eyes sparkled, reflecting the full green skirt, gathered and held at the waist by a broad embroidered belt. A full-sleeved blouse and matching bolero completed the outfit. For once her chignon was discarded and her long smooth hair was drawn into an ornamental clip at the nape of her neck.

"I beg your pardon?" Jan looked up, startled.

"I was asking if you would care to dance," Adam repeated patiently.

"Oh, I don't think so, thank you. It's very hot in here," Jan muttered nervously.

"Then we'll go for a stroll and cool off. I'm sure Louise would enjoy a dance with Paul in the meantime," he insisted smoothly. "Or perhaps you think it might be too chilly outside?"

His deep blue eyes probed her averted face relentlessly, waiting while Jan hunted for a further excuse. She longed to be held in his arms while they danced, even while she dreaded the sensations it would arouse. Even more, she knew she didn't want to venture into the intimacy of the starlit night until she'd learned how to cope with the wild delirium coursing through her body. Time was what she needed—time to control her unruly heart. Now she had this fresh hazard to face. Of all the men in the world, why did she have to fall in love with this one? It would only bring pain, and more pain.

Adam's mocking voice broke upon her thoughts.

"Well . . . is it to be outside or inside? Whatever you decide, I've booked the next ten minutes with you, however we spend the time."

"Let's dance, then," Jan suggested recklessly. She moved towards the floor as if in a trance. Paul was inviting Louise to partner him, albeit unwillingly. Especially unwillingly it seemed, Louise accepted.

The band, having incited the crowd into a festive mood, had quietened momentarily and were playing a dreamy waltz. Jan moved around the floor held close in Adam's arms, her soft curls brushing the cleft in his chin. She dared not speak and he seemed content to be silent. They moved in harmony with the melody and she wished it could last forever. As the music came to an end she imagined that for a moment Adam drew her even closer until she felt the hard muscles of his body against her own soft curves. It must have been an illusion, though, for he released her so abruptly she almost stumbled. His hand shot out to steady her.

"Careful, little one."

Jan was speechless, her throat closed and raw.

Louise and Paul were leaving the floor, their faces set. It didn't look as if the waltz had been much of a success as far as they were concerned, thought Jan wryly.

Adam claimed Louise for the next dance and both Jan and Paul relaxed as the other pair moved away.

"Let's have a breath of fresh air." Taking Jan's elbow, Paul led her outside. She was glad to feel the refreshing night air cool her hot cheeks. They walked to the fence in a comfortable silence and Jan felt her taut nerves slow their jangling. She didn't resist as Paul drew her close.

"Jan, you're so sweet. Don't ever change, will you?" he begged, oddly tense. His lips met hers in a gentle caress and she responded, feeling a desperate need for reassurance. At a moment when her heart felt so bruised and uncertain, all she wanted was to lean on Paul's strength and accept the affection being offered her. After a few more minutes, both absorbed in their private thoughts, they wandered back to the barn, hand in hand.

Louise came up to them. "Adam had some sort of emergency at Grey Towers," she explained. "He was in a terrific hurry, so I said Paul would probably take me home." She turned to Paul, her look almost challenging. "I hope you don't object."

"It will be a pleasure, dear lady," he responded with a slight bow.

Louise bit her lip, but didn't say any more because a hefty young farmer with an engaging grin and freckles came up and dragged her into the reel that was about to start.

Neither of the girls lacked partners, and at midnight when the revelry ended they climbed into Paul's car with aching feet and tired eyes, almost falling asleep on the short journey home.

They suffered a rude awakening though, for, as Paul drove along the terrace towards the side entrance of Chapters, he gave a sudden shout of alarm before accelerating like a maniac, then skidding to an abrupt halt.

"Fire. The place is on fire!"

Smoke was pouring out of a ground floor window which Jan recognized as her own bedroom. Flinging themselves out of the car, they burst into the house. Louise ran to telephone the fire brigade while Jan and Paul rushed in the direction of the smoke.

As they opened the bedroom door, flames leaped towards them and they banged it shut quickly.

"Get some water while I check the rooms on each side," Paul yelled. Jan dashed off to fill every bucket and bowl she could lay hands on. Louise joined her and they worked in furious silence, running water backwards and forwards in a desperate effort to contain the flames.

"If only we can stop it spreading," Jan prayed silently.

Louise echoed her thoughts. "Let's hope it doesn't break through the ceiling into the rooms above. Apart from anthing else, I only finished painting it yesterday."

Jan gave a brief hiccup of laughter even in the middle of her fear.

After what seemed an eternity, the fire brigade arrived. Within seconds the building was surrounded by dark-uniformed men running hoses everywhere, adjusting their smoke-shields and, quietly competent, trying to subdue the flames.

Louise and Jan were standing outside when Adam arrived, his dark face dismayed.

"I heard you had trouble but I didn't realize it was this bad. What happened?"

Jan shook her head dully and Louise answered for her.

"It was well and truly alight when we got back from the dance. Seems to have started in Jan's bedroom and now it's spread to Ricky's, too. Thank heaven he was away for the night!"

"Any idea what caused it?" Adam's voice was gentle as he directed the question towards Jan, but she seemed unaware of him.

"I can answer that for you, sir." The chief fire officer had overheard as he came to speak to Jan. "I'm afraid the two rooms are a complete write-off, Mrs. Reynolds," he told her apologetically. "But we've stopped the fire going any farther. You might need a couple of new ceilings there, I'm thinking, but it doesn't seem to have penetrated the floorboards in the rooms above."

"Thank goodness," breathed Louise. Then, "You've found out how it started, you said?"

"Yes." His face grim, he held out a small remnant of sacking. "Someone's been playing a nasty game with you, Mrs. Reynolds. This was soaked with petrol and set alight in your bedroom. You'll need the police out here."

Adam looked at Jan's ashen face. She was watching, but not seeing, as the men reeled in their hoses. He took her cold hand in his. "Come inside, Jan. We'll go and make everyone a hot drink."

Jan still stood as if frozen. Then as Adam gave her hand a little tug, something snapped inside her.

"Don't touch me. Don't come near me," she warned, hysteria throbbing in her voice.

Adam stayed motionless.

"Do you think I'll let you touch me now I know what a devil you are?" she almost spat. "It all adds up, doesn't it? You want to get your hands on Chapters and, because I refuse to sell, you think you'll drive me away."

Her voice hoarse, Jan was completely unaware of the pitiful sight she presented. Clothes torn and sodden, white face begrimed with soot and tears, her gray eyes flashed hatred at Adam.

"First you creep around and scare me, then you tear the place apart. When that didn't work you sneaked here in the middle of the night and hit me on the head, then just 'happened' to find me." Jan's voice rose even higher; her mouth was tremulous but she felt beyond fear of the hooded blue eyes that raked her face, the almost haughty stance as Adam stood silent.

"It all adds up," she flung accusingly. "You even left the dance early to give you time to come and set a match to the place."

Jan stepped closer. Still Adam didn't move, apart from a small muscle that twitched near the corner of his mouth.

"What are you planning next, Mr. Dexter? It'd better be good, because I'll be waiting for you."

Several weeks passed as spring moved slowly towards the early days of summer. Jan saw nothing of Adam, though Louise went out sailing with him several times. She knew Louise must have overheard the bitter accusations she had hurled at Adam that dreadful night of the fire, but they didn't talk about it, for Louise obviously didn't agree that he was Jan's unseen enemy.

Jan's own thoughts raced riotously between a conscience-stricken belief that she'd wronged Adam unforgivably, and the miserable certainty that he must have been the culprit. Yet, even while she hated him, sleepless nights and a heavy heart were a reminder that she loved him, too.

Police from Trelmouth came to inspect the damages and confirmed the fire chief's suspicions that it had been started deliberately. They spent several hours searching for more evidence, but nothing fresh came to light. Prodded by Louise, Jan told them about the night she'd been attacked but, again, there were no tell-tale signs to give them a lead. Passing tramps were the most likely offenders, the sergeant agreed eventually.

"They don't often turn to violence but, hearing someone coming, they might have panicked."

Insurance inspectors assessed the fire damage and Jan thanked providence for Mr. Spencer's insistence that the property be fully covered before she moved in. Her bedroom and Ricky's were smoke-blackened shells but fortunately, though heat had cracked all the ceiling plaster until it showered to the floor in fragments, the fire hadn't spread any farther.

Ricky had lost many of his treasures, but Louise disappeared the morning after the fire, without saying anything, and returned with her arms so laden she must have left the toyshop owner a very happy man. Even Stan, seeing Ricky's woebegone face, had turned up again that evening with a white rabbit in a homemade hutch, which rendered Ricky speechless. He flung his arms around Stan's neck and hugged him. As Stan straightened up, Jan noticed a variety of emotions pass across the weather-beaten face. For a moment he looked oddly angry as he turned on his heel and strode off.

Jan's clothes had been destroyed but, even worse, she'd lost the photographs of her happy days with David and other small mementos that meant little to anyone else but so much to her. At first it was easy to wish they'd never set eyes on Chapters, but, even as she fleetingly considered selling and moving somewhere else, she recognized a stubborn determination not to be driven away. The manor meant home for her and Ricky and that's how it would stay.

Two days after the fire several large cardboard boxes were delivered. Addressed to Jan, they came from a rather exclusive fashion shop that she and Louise had noticed along the High Street in Trelmouth. She insisted that the parcels must have been sent by mistake, but the delivery man was equally insistent that the lilac-and-gray striped boxes were meant for her, according to the clearly printed labels.

Louise helped carry them indoors and urged Jan to take a look.

"Just for curiosity's sake." She grinned wickedly. "Mine. We can always close everything up again."

The tissue inside was pushed away to reveal blouses, jumpers, slacks and a couple of attractive dresses—in fact everything Jan could possibly need to replace her ruined wardrobe. One box made a rosy flush stain her cheeks because it contained filmy underwear, nightdress and matching neglige, as well as a warmer quilted dressing gown in pale apricot, edged with deeper apricot satin.

"The clothes are all my size." Jan was completely bewildered. "But there must be a mistake. This lot'll cost me a fortune."

"Tell you what," suggested Louise practically. "You'll need one or two new things anyway because you lost so much in the fire. Why don't you try on a couple of blouses and dresses while I ring up the shop and find out more." She disappeared, leaving Jan to wonder which garment to slip on first.

Louise came back a few minutes later. "The mystery deepens. The manageress of the shop insisted the whole load was bought especially for you and paid for. There's no mistake. They're all yours, old dear!"

Jan had grown so used to bad things happening lately that she could scarcely take in the fact that she'd been sent the sort of gift that would make any girl's heart start dancing. She knew Louise couldn't possibly have afforded the clothes. Her mind flew next to Paul but, when she tackled him, he seemed genuinely bewildered. Despite her uneasiness, Jan couldn't help being grateful to her unknown benefactor. There was so little cash in her purse these days she was having quite a struggle, especially when it came to paying Stan's wages. Clothes were the last thing she could afford to spend money on.

After the fire the girls decided they'd have to forget about the two damaged rooms for the time being and concentrate on the rest of the house. Jan and Ricky moved upstairs to slightly larger bedrooms at the back of the manor. While regretting the temporary loss of the two rooms, which meant accepting fewer bookings, they loved their new quarters.

All the bedrooms and bathrooms were completed now, so it was time to tackle the main downstairs rooms. Little work was needed in the damask-walled drawing room. It seemed a good idea to install a television set there, maybe a few games and packs of cards, too, in case of bad weather.

As Jan suspected, Fred the postman already had a local woman in mind who could come and help with the housework once their holiday guests arrived.

Ada was enormous but her good humor was as vast as her girth and the girls quickly discovered what an asset she was. Willing to tackle anything, she waded through the cleaning and polishing like a galleon in full sail.

At last came the day they'd been waiting for. The first guests were due that afternoon.

"I'm scared," confessed Jan, half laughing, as they finished laying deep red cloths on the dining room tables.

"Me, too," Louise admitted. "I keep wondering whether we've forgotten anything, or whether they'll take one look, get in their cars and drive off again."

Soon after lunch the first guests, Mr. and Mrs. Curzon, arrived. An elderly

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We love the things we love
In spite of what they are.

Louis Untermeyer
Love

couple, their faces showed instant pleasure as they stepped onto the terrace. Jan took a liking to them immediately and thoroughly enjoyed showing them to their room. Ricky ran backwards and forwards fetching innumerable small bags from the car.

Next came Jim and Audrey Browning, a couple in their early thirties, accompanied by their only daughter, Anna, a lumpy ten-year-old. They were as enthusiastic as the Curzons about Chapters, and Jan, leaving them to settle in their rooms, felt happier than she had for weeks.

Louise had already served a light tea of dainty sandwiches, scones and rich fruit cake before their last guest of the day arrived.

Concealing amused glances, the two girls watched as bony Miss Deverall advanced towards them. Gray hair awry, duck-handled umbrella under one arm, she clutched a motley assortment of string bags and badly tied parcels. Her thin nose sported a gold-rimmed pince-nez.

"Good grief. I didn't know people actually wore those things in real life," whispered Louise in agonized undertones from the corner of her mouth.

"Shush, " warned Jan, having difficulty hiding her own amusement behind a smile of welcome as Miss Deverall pumped her hand up and down.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Reynolds. What a fascinating place." She tilted her head on one side and listened. "I can feel the friendly vibrations already."

Everyone praised Jan's meal as they sat enjoying their dinner that evening. She'd always enjoyed cooking and, with Ada helping to prepare the vegetables and Louise serving, had been quietly confident as she worked steadily in the kitchen.

Murmurs of content filled the dining room as she moved around the table pouring coffee afterwards. She slept soundly that night, feeling that the future suddenly looked much brighter.

After an equally appetizing breakfast next morning, the visitors drifted outside into warm sunshine, disappearing in different directions. Towards mid-morning a green saloon car drove up to the manor and out jumped the remaining four guests. Two brothers in their late twenties, with their wives, they'd traveled overnight from Nottingham. Jan's final tremors of apprehension disappeared as she greeted them. Simply dressed in casual shirts and shorts they were thoroughly cheerful, obviously determined to have a good holiday. They introduced themselves as Dick and Graham Carter, with their wives, Lucy and Ruth. Armed with the minimum of luggage, they quickly unpacked and within ten minutes set off with swimming gear down the narrow lane to the beach.

The week flashed by for Jan and Louise. They took turns preparing meals, for Louise was an accomplished cook and produced the occasional exotic dish, as a contrast to Jan's more traditional English fare. Their guests were no trouble, going off soon after breakfast each day, sometimes returning for a light midday snack, and invariably rolling up ravenously hungry for dinner at night.

One afternoon towards the end of the week, Jan set out for a walk after lunch. Louise was cooking tonight's meal and had pushed her into taking a few hours off.

"Do you good to get out of the house for an afternoon," she had coaxed.

Louise was right, reflected Jan as she reached the harbor. It felt good to escape for a while even though she was enjoying life at Chapters. If only she'd never met Adam Dexter she felt everything would be really perfect. But the ache in her heart wouldn't go away, no matter how hard she tried to forget him.

There were a few people on the beach so, feeling the need to be alone, Jan carefully picked her way along the base of the jagged rocks that formed the most distant point of the horseshoe-shaped bay. The tide was going out, revealing wet smooth sand so, dangling her sandals from one hand, she walked barefoot. The sea widened out, a great moving arena, and the breeze freshened as, rounding the point, Jan found herself wandering along a narrow strip of rock-embedded sand fringing the side of the promontory that faced seawards. Far above her, though not visible from here, was the little stone look-out tower. Gray slits in the dark gray rocks penetrated quite deep into the cliff behind Jan, forming a series of caves along the beach. Intrigued, she wandered in and out. Ricky would love exploring these, she thought, and wondered if any of them had at one time opened out into the smugglers' tunnels Paul had told them about.

Strolling along, lost in thought, she decided to rest for a while. The sand was drying now in warm sunshine so, stretching out, Jan propped herself on one elbow and gazed across the turquoise-blue water towards the horizon. A few seconds later her eyes closed under the weight of sleep.

Jan stretched, feeling a slight chill. Opening gray eyes, hazy with forgotten dreams, her brow puckered as she tried to remember where she was. Realization dawned with a slight smile. What a waste of time. She was supposed to be enjoying her afternoon's freedom, not sleeping right through it.

A glance at her narrow wristwatch made Jan scramble to her feet, then start to hurry back the way she'd come. But now the turquoise water had stopped sparkling, the sun had disappeared with the turning tide, and somber grayish-green waves crashed towards her, each moving a few inches closer to the spot where she'd slept. Jan called herself all sorts of idiot. She must have slept for several hours. Not surprising, really, considering the long days she'd been working lately. Almost running now, she reached the sharp curve which, once rounded, would enable her to double back along the inside arm of the harbor.

At the end of the narrow strip of sand she stopped, dismayed. Angry waters covered the rocks, cutting her off. For a moment she considered plunging into the water before it got even deeper, but quickly discarded the idea. Swimming had never been her strong point and she knew from Louise about the treacherous crosscurrents at the harbor mouth—currents that could easily sweep an inexperienced swimmer far out to sea.

Jan started walking back the way she'd just come. Looking up, she wondered which would be the best place to scramble up to the top of the cliff. But above the wavelike slits she'd explored earlier the rocks were smooth, sloping steeply upwards. Climbing would be impossible.

Her brow puckered. It looked as if she'd have to sit it out till the tide turned. It would be cold and she'd feel hungry, but there seemed no alternative. She wasn't even sure just when the tide would turn again. The caves

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Youth's for an hour,
Beauty's a flower,
But love is the jewel that wins the world.

Moira O'Neil
Songs of the Glens of Antrim

would be sheltered, but she couldn't tell which were safely above the water mark. Dismay swept over Jan as she remembered the fresh imprint of her bare feet on the sea-washed sand inside each cave. Heart sinking, worried eyes noted the tell-tale green ridge, the tide mark of a rockface regularly submerged by water, high above her head.

What on earth was she going to do? No one at the manor would notice her absence for hours. They would assume she was enjoying a long walk several miles from home. Even now, Louise would be preparing dinner. Tonight it was to be a really spicy curry, with a choice of roast lamb for any guest whose palate couldn't cope with the more exotic dishes. Even in the midst of her predicament Jan felt the first pangs of hunger. Then her stomach churned with the realization of just how serious things were.

Time passed, twenty minutes, half an hour. Water was lapping her feet even though by now she had climbed onto a rock and stood, eyes straining, scouring the horizon for a boat. Miracles don't happen, Jan, she reminded herself dully, wondering how Ricky would cope with having no parents at all.

But miracles do happen just now and then, and today one happened for Jan. A small black speck appeared in the distance. It gradually turned into a white sail that, incredibly, seemed to be heading straight for the narrow harbor entrance. Jan started to wave, then after a second's thought stripped off the yellow jumper she wore over her cotton tee-shirt, and waved that instead, high above her head.

The yacht was plunging up and down in the foam-crested waves. Jan jumped up and down frantically, shouting at the top of her voice, though it was doubtful anyone could hear.

He's seen me. Jan's heart leaped as the boat changed course slightly and headed towards her. Her heart plunged like the vessel's prow as it came close enough for her to see who was on board.

Adam. Oh no. Why did it have to be him?

"I can't come closer," he shouted, steadying the yacht as it threatened to hurl itself onto the rocks. "Grab the rope when I throw it." A stout rope snaked through the air towards Jan. Desperately she snatched at it.

"Good girl. Now tie it around your waist, then wade out towards me. Careful now."

With icy, trembling fingers Jan knotted the rope around her, then, slithering down the rock, pushed her way, half swimming, half wading, through the heaving water towards the yacht. Strong arms caught her under the armpits. With one heave she was dragged over the side and dumped unceremoniously on the deck as Adam hurried to adjust the tiller and sails, heading away from danger.

Saturated and shaking violently, Jan huddled on the deck as Adam maneuvred the yacht through the narrow channel into the calm waters of the harbor. He didn't speak until the mooring line was attached to a buoy. Straightening up he looked at Jan at last.

"What the hell d'you think you're up to?" Each word fell like a whiplash. "Haven't you any sense at all?"

"I'm sorry . . . I fell asleep." Jan faltered. "When I woke up the tide had come in." His reactions were always so violent and condemning where she was concerned, she thought wretchedly.

"You'd better come into the cabin." Adam almost pushed her through the low doorway and flung a towel and blanket across the small space. "Get out of those wet things and rub yourself down while I find some dry clothes."

She hesitated. Raking her face with hard eyes, he said scornfully, "I won't look, I promise. You've nothing to offer that's likely to appeal to me."

Shaken even more by the cutting edge of his tongue than by her ordeal, Jan complied, relieved to strip off her soaking clothes and huddle into the warm blanket. Back turned to her, Adam was rummaging in a locker. Still without looking, he flung across a pair of jeans and white chunky-knit sweater.

"Here, put these on." Cruelly he added, "Paul's not here, so it doesn't matter what you look like."

Jan slipped the clothes on meekly, wondering how best to hold up the jeans which could almost have wound twice about her slender waist.

"You'll need a belt. Catch." Adam slung a broad leather belt across the cabin, then finally turned and looked at Jan.

"My sainted aunt."

He was actually laughing, the beast. Jan set her teeth and glared back fiercely, even though she'd no rights in the matter at all. She probably did look terrible, she freely acknowledged, glancing down.

As Adam moved towards her Jan jumped like a startled kitten. "Relax, little one." He knelt down and one by one rolled up the enveloping legs of the jeans until they merely brushed her ankles, then strapped Jan's sandals onto her cold feet. Moving to the stove he started to warm a kettle of water. As it simmered he poured out a small tot of brandy and made Jan swallow it.

"I seem to be making a habit of pouring spirits down your throat," he commented dryly. "When are you going to learn to take care of yourself?"

"I manage quite well," Jan retorted defensively, her courage beginning to creep back at the same time as the slight tinge of color in her cheeks. "It's just unfortunate that you always happen to turn up when I'm having trouble." Her words trailed away. Between them like a yawning chasm lay the memory of their last bitter meeting. She had told him much the same thing then, but had gone on to accuse him of deliberately trying to harm her.

Adam clearly remembered, too, for his face darkened, but he said nothing. Deftly he brewed a pot of tea and after pouring it into two thick mugs, pushed one towards Jan.

"Drink." From a locker he produced a pocket of appetizing ham sandwiches and a cherry cake which he proceeded to cut into thick wedges. "Eat." He gestured towards them and Jan, by now ravenous, tucked in.

They ate in silence, rocked by the gentle motion as the yacht bobbed on its moorings. Eventually Jan leaned back against the cushioned bunk with a small sigh of contentment.

"Better now?" Adam was watching.

"Much better," Jan conceded gratefully. "I'm very much obliged to you for rescuing me." She gulped, eyes lowered. "I wouldn't have expected you to."

"Doesn't quite follow since you've cast me as a villain of the piece, you mean?" Adam's tone was soft. Distrustful, she glanced up in swift alarm, but, incredibly, a mocking, but not unkind, smile was quirking his lips.

"Well, it's a little . . . unexpected." Jan twisted her hands together nervously.

"I assume you wouldn't have been surprised if I'd sailed past, expressed suitable regrets when your body was eventually washed up, then made an offer for Chapters that your executors would have been delighted to accept."

"Some . . . something like that," Jan agreed, still not meeting his eyes.

Adam's smile disappeared and an unreadable look shuttered his face. Standing up, his tall figure almost filled the confined space as he cleared away the debris of their impromptu meal.

"Come on, I'll get you back to dry land. You'll feel more at ease once you can run away from me."

They rowed ashore in his small blue dinghy, then walked in silence to the junction where Jan's path led upwards through the trees. Adam would have a longer walk along the inland side of the harbor to where the main road curved towards the coast on its way to Trelmouth. Jan knew he parked his car there whenever he went sailing with Louise.

"Well, thank you, once again." Jan still couldn't meet his eyes for fear that the love and doubt in her own would betray her. She kept them firmly anchored somewhere across the center of his navy blue jumper.

Adam muttered something and suddenly seized her shoulders, dragging her close.

"You're so terrified I'll murder you one of these days. Have you ever thought there might be other things to fear from me?"

Strong lips descended on hers and forced them cruelly apart. His kiss was without tenderness, and one hand twisted among Jan's tangled curls, pulling her head back so that there was no chance of escape. Motionless with shock, she didn't move until strong hands explored her softly-rounded shoulders and moved along the slender curve of her spine. Then she jerked away, horrified partly by the savagery of Adam's attack, but even more by her own crazy longing to wind both arms around his neck and respond.

Adam took one look at the bruised, trembling mouth and frightened eyes but, before he could speak, Jan gave a muffled exclamation and ran, to be swallowed instantly by the thickly wooded slopes.

She was hoping to slip into the house and reach her bedroom without bumping into anyone, but luck was against her. Ricky was just going into his own room as his mother sped upstairs. He stopped, wide-eyed.

"Come quickly. I don't want anyone to see me." Jan pushed him into the room and closed the door. She turned on the bathroom taps, then as the water started running, pulled fresh clothes from the cupboard and started telling Ricky what had happened—or most of it, at least.

"Wasn't it lucky Mr. Dexter found you? We'll end up by almost liking him, I expect," said Ricky, unabashed by his mother's grunt of disbelief as she went back into the adjoining bathroom.

Breakfast next morning provided a welcome return to normality. Audrey Browning was in top form and, once she'd reached the toast and marmalade stage, started to entertain the others.

"Something very weird happened here last night," she began. "I should have expected it in such an old house, but . . ." She raised her eyebrows expressively. "Anna had gone to bed and Jim was outside in the car, repairing the indicator."

"Escaping from my wife for half an hour," her husband interjected, grinning.

She carried on, regardless. "I decided to go to bed early, so I went into our bathroom for a quick wash. I changed my mind, though." Her tone lowered to a sepulchral whisper. "The bathroom door swung open with a creak the instant I touched the handle. Inside, something white was floating to and fro." She paused dramatically. "I slammed the door shut, scared to death."

Mrs. Curzon was looking at Anna rather anxiously, but the child's cheeks were bulging with toast and marmalade and she didn't seem worried.

"So what happened?" the old lady prompted Mrs. Browning. The four Carters and Miss Deverall were listening, absorbed. Louise and Jan, apprehensive, wondered what fresh trouble was about to descend on them. Satisfied that she'd grasped her audience's full attention, Mrs. Browning leaned back in her chair.

"When Jim came, I told him there was a ghost in our bathroom. So he opened the door . . . and saw it, too."

Everyone's gaze switched to her husband who smiled wickedly and stole the punchline.

"We'd left the window open, the door slightly ajar, so there was quite a draught. The toilet roll had blown undone and a couple of yards of paper were flapping around, right across the middle of the bathroom."

When the laughter died away Miss Deverall chipped in, "I've got a ghost story, too."

"It was my first night here." Her voice was clear and precise. "I was lying in bed, quite tired, when it started."

"When what started?" piped Anna, to be shushed by her mother.

"Footsteps in that attic overhead." Miss Deverall's voice hushed. "Backwards and forwards across the ceiling they trod. Backwards, forwards . . ."

Jan's hands were clammy. If she had ghosts to contend with on top of everything else, she might as well give up the struggle right now.

"So what happened next?" Even Mrs. Curzon was intrigued.

"Why, I stood on a chair, banged on the ceiling with my umbrella and went back to bed," declared Miss Deverall briskly.

The tense listeners dissolved into laughter. Dismissing all thoughts of ghosts they started leaving the dining room to embark on their various plans for the day.

Miss Deverall cornered Jan and Louise as they began clearing the tables. She spoke quietly. "I thought I'd mention that I wasn't making up my story about the footsteps, Mrs. Reynolds." Her beaky nose twitched as she gave an almost mischievous smile. "I couldn't resist capping Mrs. Browning's ghost story. But in fact I did investigate a little further than I admitted just now."

Jan and Louise were gazing at their

THE BALL

by H. B. Bjorklund

Once in this room
the polished floor
mirrored your slippered feet;

your ribboned flounces
dipped and swirled
to waltz tunes soft and sweet,

while roses burned
like passions roused
and wilted in the heat.

Beyond the braid
and scarlet cloth
the arms that held you tight,

you watched the candles'
waxen tears
spilled in the summer night

and saw the moth
that came too close
and perished in their light.

eccentric guest with dawning respect.

"You see, I've had quite a few adventures in my time and I find it remarkably difficult to be nervous about things like footsteps in an empty room." Miss Deverall looked faintly embarrassed. "So next morning I looked around until I found a tiny flight of stairs curving upwards to a door that obviously led into the attic."

"And . . .?" queried Louise.

"Inside the attic I found all the signs that someone had been up there only a few hours earlier. Footsteps on the dusty floor, boxes opened and fresh fingerprints showing clearly on the lids. And a paraffin lamp which had obviously been used very recently."

Miss Deverall paused and looked at Jan. "I have heard the same footsteps on several other occasions since then, but I hesitated to mention it to you in case you knew all about it and thought I was an interfering old woman. When I was telling my 'ghost' story just now, it was obvious that you didn't know. What are you going to do about your regular night-time intruder, Mrs. Reynolds?'

As soon as Miss Deverall had pottered away, a thin untidy figure in her shapeless beige cardigan, Jan and Louise exchanged one meaningful glance and, without a word, rushed upstairs. The low-ceilinged space under the roof was vast, supported by cobwebbed timbers and filled with the clutter of years. It was quite well lit by thin oblongs of daylight which penetrated small gabled windows set high among the twisted chimney stacks.

Miss Deverall was right. Someone had been up here, and not long ago. There were clear indications that many of the closely-packed chests had been disturbed so recently there hadn't been time for the dusty gray shroud of years to settle again. Footprints marked the floorboards, smudged fingerprints told a tale of impatient hands that had wrenched open the lids of cases and trunks without bothering to close them again, spilling their contents onto the floor.

"Someone's certainly very interested in this place," drawled Louise in a carefully matter-of-fact voice that didn't deceive Jan for an instant. "What are we going to do about it?"

"Short of keeping watch every single night, I don't see what we can do," Jan reflected slowly. "The police couldn't find any clues when they came here after we had the fire. And I doubt if they'd have time to hang around waiting indefinitely for the next thing to happen. We'll have to deal with it ourselves somehow."

The most sensible precaution seemed to be to fix a stout lock on the attic door and ask Stan to check all the window and door fastenings in the house, despite his grumbles.

"The building's riddled with old tunnels." He scowled irritably at the courtyard door that concealed a flight of steps leading down to the cellars. Dripping oil on to a rusty bolt, he wiggled it without success. "You'll get people creeping up through the floorboards, be it you chain up every door and window in the place."

Jan interrupted him impatiently. "We'll feel safer if we at least try to keep them out, Stan. Don't be such a pessimist. Do you want to frighten me to death?"

Stan stomped away without a word, rigid disapproval outlining his bony shoulders.

Now what have I said wrong? wondered Jan, half amused, half exasperated.

A few mornings later Louise was working in the kitchen when she received a phone call that threw her into a flurry of activity. Terry Somerville, the writer whose natural history book she was illustrating, telephoned to say he'd be traveling to the Scilly Isles that week and wanted to see Louise while he was in Cornwall. He knew the Trelmouth area and had even stayed at Adam Dexter's hotel once or twice in the past. He would telephone her as soon as he arrived.

Louise's second phone call from the writer came just as she and Jan had finished serving dinner a few days later. Could she meet him at Grey Towers?

"Leave the clearing up," Jan offered. "I'll do it, because the two of you will have loads to talk about."

With an unrepentant grin Louise admitted she wouldn't need much persuading, and she departed, portfolio tucked under one arm.

Smiling to herself, Jan cleared the debris from the dining tables and tackled the washing up. She was glad for Louise's sake that Terry was here. The portfolio contained some sketches that even to Jan's untrained eye looked highly professional. Delicate yet sure strokes had captured so many of the birds and small creatures in the woods, wild flowers, ferns, the necklace of sea-washed rockpools encircling the harbor. Somehow Louise had managed to get a lot of her own work done, considering she took a full share of the daily running of the manor. Jan knew that already she was a successful artist but she was incredibly modest, despite her clowning, and was highly self-critical. If Terry thought her drawings were good, she'd be on cloud number nine.

Hands deep in the steaming water, Jan automatically washed plates and cutlery, enjoying the unusual quietness of the kitchen. Ricky was in bed and the guests had all gone about their own amusements. Jan's feeling of quiet contentment lasted as she dried the dishes, then stacked them on the dresser. She was confident now that Chapters stood a good chance of paying its way, providing a decent living for herself and Ricky.

Once the kitchen was tidy, Jan went along to the library. Finding it empty, she settled down with a pile of mending, glad to have a peaceful evening to herself. But try as she might, her thoughts kept straying. Would Louise see Adam at Grey Towers? She wondered if he ever gave a thought to her, Jan, then decided with an inward shrinking that it was best if he didn't. Even before their last meeting, which had ended so disastrously, he'd made it clear he thought her insignificant and naïve, an irritating schoolgirl. Even though common sense insisted that he was an enemy who would stop at nothing to wreck he plans, Jan's senses persisted in wanting something quite different. The longing wouldn't go away, pushing and probing. Her questing mind was desperately trying to find a different answer to the strange things that had happened here.

But even if she found by some miracle that he could be trusted, Jan knew it wouldn't advance her own cause in the slightest. The two of them were poles apart. Adam was sophisticated, wealthy, successful, while she was an everyday sort of person, struggling with a small son and a large house that often threatened to overwhelm her. Just occasionally—this evening for instance—Jan couldn't help envying Louise her easy glamor, the sparkle that made her such a delightful companion. How could Adam resist such a combination? And to crown it all, she was Jan's dearest friend, so it was impossible even to indulge in a passion of jealousy, without feeling petty and disloyal.

Lost in thought, the hours ticked by unheeded and Jan was startled when

Louise came into the room and slung her portfolio onto the couch.

"You're home early." Surprised, Jan glanced at the clock. "No," she corrected, "you're late. What did Terry think?"

Louise dropped into the armchair opposite Jan, her green eyes glowing. "He was really pleased. Said they were just what he wanted." She was obviously relieved and looked on top of the world. "He'll be coming here tomorrow. Adam and Paul joined us for a drink so we didn't have quite enough time to finish talking shop. It'll be fun showing him Chapters—he'll love it."

"He'll stay to lunch, won't he?" asked Jan.

Louise's eyelashes flickered and she looked slightly awkward. "Well, actually, no." She glanced across at Jan. "I don't know that you'll be very keen on the idea, but Adam invited us to lunch tomorrow because he knew it was my birthday." She leaned forward, looking as if a weight had rolled off her shoulders once she'd plucked up courage to deliver the invitation. "Do come, Jan. I know you don't like Adam, but I do, and I just can't believe he'd try to harm you. He purposely suggested lunch because it was a time when we could both come and leave Ada to cope with things around here. And it would be a good chance for you to have a look at the opposition," she persuaded deviously.

Jan felt trapped. She already knew that tomorrow was Louise's birthday, of course, and had bought her a scarlet silk blouse that Louise had coveted ever since she saw it in Trelmouth. There was absolutely no excuse for avoiding the invitation, short of a blunt refusal, and she wouldn't want to embarrass Louise—or give Adam Dexter the satisfaction of thinking she was scared to face him again.

"All right." Jan gave in reluctantly. "I'll come if you're quite sure he really did extend the invitation to me as well. Though I can't imagine why."

Feeling it was a dangerous subject, she changed the conversation. "Why was Paul at the hotel? Was he having dinner?"

"No, he'd dropped in for a quick drink and chat with Adam about some boundary fences that need repairing. The farm seems to stretch right round the back of Adam's place as well as round Chapters," Louise explained. "Anyway, Adam and Paul eventually came over to where I was sitting with Terry, so the four of us talked for a while. That reminds me." She bent and searched in her slim pouch handbag. "Paul gave me some foreign stamps for Ricky's collection. They're from New Zealand—he was talking about a letter he'd just received from a friend out there."

"Bill Seymour, I imagine," Jan hazarded. "That's the man who wants Paul to go into business with him."

"Yes, that's right. We were talking about the opportunities there are for people in New Zealand, because Adam already knew that Paul has a chance to go and Terry has actually been there."

Louise's face became pensive and, propping her chin on one slim hand, she rested her elbow on the padded chair arm. "Paul is certainly very loyal to his father. Soft, you might say . . . he ought to do his own thing, because life's too short to mess up." She sighed. "But oddly enough I can understand how he feels about not letting his father down. Not that I particularly like Mr. Mallory, but he's certainly poured his heart and soul into that farm and, of course, Paul is his only son."

"Quite a burden for any young man," Jan commented. Then she asked, "Did he and Adam have a look at your sketches, too?"

"Terry showed them." Louise was silent for a moment, then confessed: "It was quite flattering, actually. They seemed really impressed. Even Paul." She gave a short laugh. "Funny, really. I think he's gradually realizing I'm not completely useless, now that it's nearly time for me to leave."

"Oh, Louise, don't say such a thing," Jan implored quickly.

"I'll have to start thinking about it soon," Louise warned her reluctantly, with an affectionate smile. "You're standing nicely on your own feet now. I love being here, but you don't need me like you did in the beginning. And once this commission is finished I'll have to start looking for another. You know what an expensive girl I am." Pulling herself slowly out of the deep chair she stretched her arms above her blonde head and yawned. "Anyway, let's not think about it tonight. Just take one day at a time."

And that brings us to tomorrow and lunch at Grey Towers, thought Jan with a sinking heart, as she gathered up her needlework and, switching off the light, followed Louise out of the room.

Terry Somerville arrived soon after breakfast next morning, bearing a large bunch of long-stemmed pink roses which he presented to Louise with a flourish.

"Happy birthday, my lovely."

"Terry, they're beautiful. Thank you." Louise kissed his cheek warmly, then turned and introduced him to Jan. Jan took to the young writer immediately. Wiry and energetic, he looked like a young man who thoroughly enjoyed his way of life.

They chatted lazily over coffee, then decided it was time to show Terry round the grounds, so they wandered upwards through the woods and looked back, downhill towards the sea. The morning fled as they rambled along and stopped here and there while he examined more closely the wealth of the flowers and plants, or pointed out the secret world of insects and woodland creatures to his fascinated companions.

"I suppose we'd better get back," Louise suggested reluctantly at last, glancing at the workmanlike watch on her wrist. "Jan and I ought to put on some glad rags before we go to lunch. Nothing too fancy, just enough to make sure we don't get chucked out of Adam's posh dining room."

Neither she nor Jan took more than a few minutes to change and they soon joined Terry whom they'd left meandering along the terrace. He looked longingly towards the harbor. "I suppose we couldn't pop and have a quick look down there?"

Jan hesitated. "We haven't time to walk down and back, but the track is just wide enough for my little car. If we hurry, we can give you a quick glimpse, if that'll do."

"This is crazy. We'll really have to get a move on." Louise gasped, breathless, as they scrambled into the car. "C'mon . . .let's roll."

Jan turned on the ignition and headed for the winding track that led down to the harbor. She skirted the wide terrace round the house and drove competently between the trees. As the car reached the first corner, a bend that veered sharply to the right, she gave a cry of dismay.

"I can't stop. The brakes aren't working."

Terry leaned across from the front passenger seat and wrenched the wheel hard. The car crashed into the undergrowth and stopped. There was silence.

"Anyone hurt?" Terry mopped his brow with his sleeve.

"Nothing special," Louise managed shakily from the back. "How about you, Jan?"

"I'm all right."

Terry gave a sharp exclamation. "You've banged your head." With gentle fingers he pushed Jan's hair back from her temple. "You're going to have a bit of a bruise, Jan. And there's a cut we ought to bathe."

"What on earth happened?" demanded Louise. "You had the car serviced only a couple of days ago."

"I put my foot on the brake and nothing happened." Jan leaned back wearily as reaction caught up with her.

"I'll tell you what happened," Terry told them, grim-faced, from the open hood where he was examining the car. "Your brake cable has been cut—and if you've had no trouble with the car since it was serviced, someone's played a very dangerous trick on you—probably during the night."

"Oh, no. Not again." Jan's eyes filled with tears as the enormity of the hatred that was being directed towards her finally sank in. "Thank heavens you took Ricky to school this morning, Louise. We'd have been killed outright if I'd taken him in my own car."

Louise nodded soberly, speechless for once. They'd already told Terry about the other incidents Jan had suffered and, putting his arm about her shoulders, he comforted, "Don't give up. You'll lick them in the end." His voice was serious. "But you'll have to tell the police about this latest episode, Jan."

Leaving the car buried nose first in the shrubbery, they climbed back uphill to the house. Terry had walked to Chapters earlier so, after bathing Jan's forehead, they climbed into Louise's car and drove to Grey Towers. Louise and Terry had both defended Adam stoutly when Jan wondered aloud if he'd had anything to do with the accident.

"It's one more thing he could easily have done." she insisted.

"Him and three dozen other people." Louise was terse. "You've got the idea in your head that Adam's your villain, but I'd swear he's not that sort of man. We can have a good look at his face when we arrive, if you like. We won't say a word about the accident—just see if there's any reaction. But there won't be," she concluded stoutly. "Because it's nothing to do with him."

Adam came down the wide steps of the hotel as they drew up at the front entrance. His expression showed only welcome and, if he was surprised that they weren't dead or injured, he certainly hid it well.

Jan avoided his keen scrutiny by turning aside to look at her surroundings. Beautifully-tended flowerbeds glowed like jewels in the close-clipped green lawns circling the hotel. Stark gray stone walls were relieved by the building's extravagant design, twin towers and crenellated turrets lending it something of a fairytale appearance.

"Sleeping Beauty's palace," murmured Jan to herself, not realizing her host was close behind her.

"I'd have expected you to find Beauty and the Beast more appropriate," commented Adam in suave tones, low in her ear.

Jan flushed and moved away quickly, keenly aware of the sardonic smile Adam slanted in her direction before leading them into the hotel. The semicircular dining room was crowded, but a table had been reserved for them by the window. Looking around, Jan was glad she'd chosen to wear a formal dress for the occasion. She'd chosen a pale green silk that clung to the slender curves of her breasts and hugged the trim waist before falling into soft, full folds. A boat-shaped neckline revealed the vulnerable column of her throat and a small gold locket swung on a delicate chain around her neck.

She had washed her hair early that morning and left it to curl softly. The graze on her temple was concealed, but she could feel the tenderness surrounding it and thought ruefully of the fine bruise she'd soon have there. Her head seemed to have taken quite a battering since she'd been down here.

Once they'd dealt with the serious business of choosing their meal from the elaborate menu, Terry and Louise kept the conversation going, moving from one anecdote to the next. Jan found herself joining in easily, even though she was ever aware of Adam's gaze and the memory of their last meeting. Casting a surreptitious glance at his firm lips she wondered headily what it would feel like to have them kiss her own with love—not bruising them in fury and scorn as he'd done after rescuing her from the sea.

Adam had given Louise a small, exquisitely-fashioned brooch in the form of a fern for her birthday. Silver, studded with tiny pearls, it was obviously expensive and Jan couldn't help wondering yet again what the future held for her friend and the owner of Grey Towers. She supposed drearily that it would come to a natural climax when Louise finally decided on the date she would leave Cornwall. It was unthinkable that Adam would let her go. He was just biding his time until the two of them told the world that they couldn't bear to part.

As it was such a sunny day, Adam suggested that the four of them should move to the paved terrace for coffee. They had only just settled into comfortable cane garden chairs when a lean black shape erupted from the shrubbery near by and ran up to Adam.

"Hello, Prince. Where've you been all morning? Up in the woods again, I dare say." Adam stroked the dog's gleaming coat and rubbed his chest affectionately.

Prince suddenly pricked up his ears and left Adam abruptly, padding to where Jan was sitting quietly, sipping her coffee. The dog gave a short excited bark, then jumped up at her, licking her face, her neck, her arms in an abandonment of excitement. Jan laughed and, sliding her arms about the gleaming black neck, hugged him quite unaffectedly, completely delighted to find a friend in this alien territory.

"Down, Prince. What the devil d'you think you're doing?" Adam's voice was stern. Reluctantly the dog detached himself from Jan but sat as close to her as possible, tongue lolling, eyes bright, tail periodically giving a happy thump on the ground.

"I've got it, now. You two have met before, haven't you?" Adam demanded. "Prince came home limping a few weeks ago, with a handkerchief around his foot. Did you have something to do with it?"

"Yes," admitted Jan and explained what had happened. "Ricky and I decided you must be his owner because when he left us he came in this direction." She smiled, unaware that it was the most natural one she had yet given Adam. "It looks as if the invalid has completely recovered."

Adam smiled back at her, almost warmly. "Oh, he's got the constitution of an ox."

His face changed abruptly and his

eyes narrowed.

"What happened to your head?" he snapped.

Jan put one hand to her temple, dismayed. She'd carefully pulled her curls forward to conceal the graze, but Prince's fervent advances had disarranged them so that the livid mark showed clearly. No doubt the bruise was beginning to darken, too—it certainly felt pretty tender.

"I bumped myself in the car," she explained carefully. "It probably looks worse than it is."

"How do you mean, you 'bumped yourself'?" His tone was dangerously mild.

"Someone arranged a little accident for her," Terry elaborated. "Cut the brake cable."

The look on Adam's face frightened Jan. His blue eyes blazed, lips compressed into a thin, furious line. She felt lean fingers digging into her wrist as he pulled her towards him to examine the graze more closely.

"Luckily we were only driving down to the harbor, so not much harm was done," Louise told him, looking curiously at Adam's tense expression. "But if Jan had driven Ricky to school this morning down Trelmouth Hill, it would've been curtains for both of them!"

"Have you told the police?"

"Not yet. We were in a hurry to come here." Jan pulled her wrist away from his clasp and rubbed the angry red marks made by his fingers. "But I will as soon as we go home."

"Is that a promise?" Adam's eyes were flecked with angry sparks, but there was something else in his face, too, an indefinable expression that Jan wanted to commit to memory and analyze later. It wasn't guilt . . . was it anger and disappointment that he'd failed once again to get rid of her? Or was is something quite different?

"Let's talk about more cheerful things," Louise suggested, breaking the tension. "I'll make sure Jan rings the police as soon as we get home, if that'll set your mind at rest, Adam."

The conversation turned to more general things until reluctantly Terry broke up the party. Looking at his watch, he reminded the others that he must make a move.

"I'd like to reach the Scillies this evening, then I can get an early start in the morning. I need to do just a bit more research before I can begin writing the final chapter. If you don't get your facts right, some bright spark will always enjoy writing to put you straight."

He bade Louise and Jan a cheerful farewell and stood beside Adam, watching as the open-topped sports car nosed its way down the drive, away from Grey Towers.

"Well, that wasn't such an ordeal after all, was it?" Louise challenged, amused, as Jan pursed her lips and admitted begrudgingly that it hadn't been too bad.

"The food was lovely," she conceded. "And Prince saved the day—it's always good to find a friend in the enemy camp."

"Look, there's Paul and his father," Jan pointed out as they reached a narrow shoulder a few minutes' drive along the lane that skirted Chapters. "Can we stop for a minute? I'd like to thank him for the foreign stamps before I forget."

Louise obediently pulled in beside the two men, who were leaning over the fence. They seemed to be taking a close look at a group of cattle in the meadow.

"Good afternoon. Isn't it a perfect day?" Jan called.

They greeted the girls pleasantly, Mr. Mallory raising his trilby hat from his graying head.

"Ricky asked me to thank you for the New Zealand stamps, Paul," Jan told him. "He was thrilled with them." She gave a wide smile that lit her gray eyes. "The children all have stamp collecting on the brain at the moment—it's the latest craze."

Paul smiled at her affectionately. He hadn't attempted to kiss her again since the night of the barn dance, and Jan was glad of it because she valued his friendship so much. She'd been half afraid the kiss might have turned it into a more demanding relationship. It was tempting to think she might save her pride that way, but Paul was too good to be treated as a substitute for the man she really wanted. Even though Adam was an impossible dream. And she had a feeling that Paul didn't really want any more of her than the close friendship they already had, a friendship that would stand the test of years.

"Glad to be of service," Paul was saying. "I'll save any more I come across." A quick frown creased his brow.

"Come to think of it, I wonder what happened to Mr. Linton's stamp collection? It must be all of ten years ago that he died, but I remember looking through the albums with him when I was a boy." Paul crinkled his eyes against the sun, thinking back over the years. "He spent hours with his magnifying glass poring over those stamps. He had thousands of them. I suppose Mrs. Linton packed them away after he died."

"It's strange that you should mention them, today of all days, because I can tell you exactly where they are." Jan told them. She glanced sideways at Louise. "I didn't even have time to tell Louise, what with birthday excitement, Terry's visit, then lunch at the hotel." She explained, "I had a mysterious note in this morning's post from a Mr. Grayling. Apparently my godmother sold him her husband's entire stamp collection only a year ago, shortly before she died."

"So what does Mr. Grayling want?" asked Louise curiously. The men waited in silence for Jan to go on. She looked a little worried.

"Well, that's what's so peculiar. The note said he'd found something that might be very important and feels it essential to show me personally. Not a hint of what it might be." Jan spread her small tanned hands expressively. "He apologized for the short notice but said he'd like to call and see me this evening."

"Oh, blow. And I'm going out after dinner," complained Louise. "I'll miss all the fun."

"Let's hope he's found a very valuable stamp and is honest enough to want to split the bounty with Mrs. Linton's goddaughter," Paul teased Jan.

"What was Mr. Linton like?" she asked him curiously. Then, turning her gaze to Paul's father, "I expect you knew him well, Mr. Mallory. Was he a good neighbor?"

The thought crossed her mind that Mr. Mallory didn't look at all well. He was paler than usual, and the florid veins on his cheeks were standing out noticeably against his tan. His eyes seemed shuttered as if his thoughts were far away. He took a moment to reply, then almost angrily told her, "Didn't have much to do with the chap. Always been too busy. I've no time for dreamers," he ended abruptly, walking back to the fence as if to signify that it was time he and Paul were allowed to get on with their work.

Louise took the hint and switched on the engine again.

"We must get back and see how Ada's managed without us. 'Bye for now."

Paul's smile for once included Louise as he raised a hand in farewell.

But Mr. Mallory didn't even turn, standing with his back towards them, gazing across the field into the distance.

"What's bitten him?" wondered Louise, looking back at his reflection in the mirror as they moved off. "He's no bundle of fun at the best of times, but he really got snappy when you mentioned Mr. Linton. D'you suppose the two of them had a feud over your godmother when they were all young and ardent?"

"Louise, you're an idiot," gurgled Jan. "I can't imagine Mr. Mallory being young. As for ardent, well . . ."

They were still chuckling as the car reached Chapters, and they were soon immersed in preparations for the evening meal.

Afterward, Jan hurried a reluctant Ricky up to bed and tucked him in with a good night kiss, while Louise went off to visit a friend she'd made in Trelmouth.

At nine o'clock Jan decided that the mysterious Mr. Grayling wasn't going to call after all. When the doorbell rang she hurried from the kitchen, a little surprised. Standing meditatively on the porch, gazing across the terrace, stood an elderly man with a rather scholarly air.

"May I please speak with Mrs. Reynolds?" he inquired courteously. "I hope she is free. I was able to give her only short notice of my visit."

"I'm Jan Reynolds," Jan introduced herself. "You must be Mr. Grayling? Do come in."

She ushered him into the library. "What can I do for you, Mr. Grayling?" she asked. "I was intrigued by your note."

"You may decide I possess an overactive imagination," Mr. Grayling told her deprecatingly. "None the less I felt it my duty to contact you." He settled himself in the armchair Jan indicated and she perched on the arm of the couch, waiting. "Mrs. Linton knew of my interest in stamps and contacted me about fifteen months ago to ask if I still wished to add to my collection. Her husband had died some ten years previously, but for sentimental reasons she had retained his albums." Mr. Grayling coughed a little and accepted gratefully the glass of sherry Jan offered him. "I gathered that Mrs. Linton had fallen on hard times. It somewhat surprised me, as I had always understood Mr. Linton to be comfortably off. She offered me his stamp collection and I felt able to offer her quite a large sum of money for it."

"That would account for an entry in one of my godmother's bank statements," Jan reflected. "It puzzled Mr. Spencer, her solicitor, though he guessed she must have sold something. But the money was all paid out again very quickly, to settle her debts."

"Mrs. Linton admitted that the upkeep of the manor was becoming an increasing burden. We talked briefly about her antique furniture because that happens to be my line of business. I am retired, but," Mr. Grayling smiled dryly, "I can't resist dabbling a little. In fact, the reason I called rather late tonight was that I combined my visit to you with a rather interesting sale in Trelmouth."

Jan was beginning to wonder if they would ever reach the purpose of the visit, but suddenly the old man reached inside his jacket and produced a folded sheet of paper.

"I was taken ill and remained in hospital for some months after I saw Mrs. Linton, so have only recently examined her husband's collection in detail," he explained in his precise, gentlemanly manner. "I happened to find this wedged inside the dust-jacket of one of the albums. It may well have slipped in there accidentally." He smiled apologetically. "I felt reluctant to treat it lightly, even though my first inclination was to regard it as a joke."

Unfolding the paper, Jan read the contents, an incredulous frown clouding her face. She read it a second time, slowly.

"It must be a joke." Wide-eyed, she looked at him.

"And the witnesses' signatures?" he queried gently. There was silence in the room, broken only by the ticking of the clock. "It seems to me, my dear, that you hold in your hands a document which states that Mr. Linton lent a great deal of money to Mr. Charles Mallory of Mallory Farm, just before Mr. Linton died. The farm was to be regarded as the property of Mr. Linton until such time as Mr. Mallory repaid him."

Mr. Grayling rose from his chair and pointed. "You will notice the date this was signed—precisely two days before Mr. Linton's death from heart failure. No doubt he became ill before having an opportunity to consult his solicitor. Presumably Mr. Mallory was in desperate trouble. Mr. Linton was a trusting man, something of an innocent. I can imagine him passing the money to Mr. Mallory in all good faith."

"Witnessed by Stanley Greaves and Molly Greaves," Jan read aloud, stunned by the implication of all this. She dropped the single sheet of paper onto the coffee table and, sinking into an armchair, held her head between her hands. She didn't doubt the authenticity of the paper for one moment. Here at last was her unseen enemy, the peril hidden in the shadows. Mr. Mallory was desperate to get rid of her. Only by purchasing the manor could he ever feel safe. He must have searched high and low for such an incriminating document. Jan's thoughts raced tumultuously, and Mr. Grayling sat watching conflicting expressions chase across her expressive face. It brightened as realization dawned that Adam was clear of suspicion. Then it clouded again as the full implications struck with sledgehammer blows. Mr. Mallory . . . Paul's father. Did Paul know about it? Jan felt there was nothing but a gaping abyss yawning in front of her.

And Stan. Stan was part of this hateful business, too. Thinking back, so much of his strange behaviour could be explained. All Jan could be sure of was an enormous sense of betrayal and a growing anger that was more powerful than fear.

Jan pulled her scattered wits together as she accompanied Mr. Grayling to the door.

"Good luck, my dear. You must contact your solicitor and I hope you can clear this up without too much unpleasantness."

"Much of the unpleasantness has happened already," she told him sadly. The night was drawing in, dark shadows joining together, broken here and there by traces of the dying sun. The warm air was full of summer perfume, but Jan was hardly conscious of its soft fragrance as she wandered slowly back indoors. She winced as she wondered again if Paul was involved but, even as she discarded the idea, Jan wondered how she could hide it from him. Surely she would have to confront Mr. Mallory? There was no other way, except to tear up the paper and forget it had ever existed. But if she didn't *tell* Mr. Mallory what she'd done, she and Ricky would be in permanent danger. What could she do?

The decision was taken out of her hands. As Jan's fingers closed on the handle of the library door her heart rose into her throat. Someone was already there, holding in his hands the paper that Jan had left on the coffee table.

Pulses racing, yet oddly relieved, Jan faced her enemy at last. In a voice that was clear and cool, she spoke: "Good evening, Mr. Mallory!"

Charles Mallory stood for a moment as if frozen, then raised his head slowly to stare across the room at Jan. "Forgive my intrusion, Mrs. Reynolds. As you see, I've come to collect my property." He tapped the paper with the back of his hand.

"That document belongs to me, Mr. Mallory—and it looks as if the greater part of your farm does too," retorted Jan.

The man laughed softly, an unpleasant sound deep in his throat, but no trace of amusement touched his pale brown eyes.

"We'll have to agree to differ, young lady. This is the record of some private business I had with Mr. Linton years ago. Both the Lintons are dead, so that's the end of the matter."

"It's only the beginning," Jan flashed, stung to quick anger. "My godmother suffered years of worry and hardship because you had her husband's money. You must have known . . . but you never attempted to return it. You traded on the fact that Mr. Linton was a decent man who kept your secret—even from her."

"There's no point in discussing what I might have done," Mr. Mallory interrupted brusquely. "Linton was a fool. He spent too much time playing around with his ridiculous stamp collection and pruning his roses. It was his wife's hard luck if he didn't have the wit to safeguard her interests." He thrust the folded paper into his jacket pocket.

"I've got back the agreement we made, so now I don't mind admitting I was desperate at the time. I'd been involved in some stock market deals that went wrong just when I needed the money badly. My brother died and his wife was threatening to sell her share of the farm to the highest bidder. I nearly went mad with worry. Linton was my only hope, and I told him so. He knew what the farm meant to me. I'd do anything to keep it!"

Mr. Mallory's voice rasped with scorn as he glared at Jan. "You've had it so easy. What do you know about pouring your life's blood into a place? If you thought you were going to lose it . . . would you act any differently?"

He swung around to look out of the library window, even though the late evening sky had darkened completely by now.

"I remember the night I came to beg Linton for help. I knew he was well off—though, as things turned out, it seems he was less wealthy than I'd imagined. He and his wife lived very quietly and I reckoned they'd plenty salted away."

Jan stood listening, trying to ignore the fact that soon there had to be a reckoning.

"Your godmother had gone to bed early and Linton was in here at the table with head bent over those dratted stamps." Mr. Mallory grimaced impatiently. "I tapped on the window. Didn't want anyone to know I was here." He grunted derisively. "The rest was child's play. Three days later Linton was dead . . . and I was laughing! Stan Greaves and his wife acted as witnesses to the agreement but that didn't matter. I've enough on Greaves to keep him quiet until he reaches the grave."

"You mean Stan knows about all this?" asked Jan faintly, feeling the foundations of her world crumbling.

"Enough. He doesn't know the details. Just that it was in his own interests to help me get you out of here!"

Mr. Mallory looked Jan up and down, hatred in his eyes. "I could have sworn old woman Linton would leave this place to Paul. Then I'd have found the paper eventually. She treated him like a son . . . I knew there were no relatives." He moved towards Jan and she retreated a step, shocked by the venom on his face. "Then you turned up out of the blue and wrecked everything. I couldn't find where Linton had put the agreement I'd signed and it wasn't going to be easy to search any more."

"So you tried to drive me away," breathed Jan, her eyes dull gray pools in an ashen face. She could scarcely take in what all this meant. It couldn't really be happening.

"That's right. And the question is, what are we going to do now? I've no intention of paying the money back. I've got plans for it and they don't include *you*!"

"For Paul's sake I'd like to forget it," Jan flung at him bitterly. "I wish with all my heart he needn't know what a crook his father is. But you've chained him hand and foot to that farm. It might do him a favor if someone showed what a sick obsession it's grown into in your mind. He'd be much happier doing what he wants to do."

"That's none of your business," Mr. Mallory snapped between tight lips. "Paul's no fool. I'm not going to let him leave. D'you think he'll do anything but wreck his future if he goes running off to New Zealand? Hasn't an ounce of business sense in his head that I haven't put there."

"Poor Paul," murmured Jan, sickened by the way the man spoke of his only son. Paul was to be manipulated like a puppet, just to satisfy his father's passion.

Mr. Mallory looked hard at her. "You're quite well matched, aren't you, Mrs. Reynolds? Soft and just as much a weak fool as my son." Through narrowed eyes he assessed her slight figure. "D'you think I'd trust you to keep the business of this loan to yourself? Huh." He threw back his head and gave a clipped snort of amusement. "No. I'll have to find some other answer."

He thrust out an arm as Jan pivoted on one heel and made for the door. "Just a minute. Where d'you think you're going?"

"To ring my solicitor . . . or the police," Jan burst out defiantly. "The more you say, the more I'm determined not to stand for it!"

"You have little choice, my dear." Mr. Mallory's hand clamped closely. "You see, I took the precaution of sending a message to Greaves before I came here tonight. He has to dance to my tune, but I pay him well for doing these little jobs. There wasn't time to think out exactly what disclosure would mean to me, but it seemed wise to take precautions. Everything depends on your reactions."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jan, feeling the first faint stirrings of alarm.

"Greaves is, er, looking after your young son for me at this very moment." His smile was full of self-satisfaction. "So I would advise you to think before you act."

"Ricky." Jan wrenched her arm away

from his strong grip. "Surely you wouldn't use a child in your filthy games!"

She spun on her heel and rushed towards the door, but the other, moving incredibly quickly for such a heavy man, reached it first. Mockingly he shook his head, leaning his back nonchalantly against the stout timber.

"You won't find the boy in his room. Stan will have him down in the cellars by now." He gestured towards a small alcove which was partially concealed by the heavy curtains framing the windows. A section of linenfold paneling had been pushed aside to reveal an opening in the wall. As Jan moved towards it, amazed, her tormentor talked genially, as if they were spending an amicable social evening together.

"This is a fascinating building, my dear. The doorway here leads into a corridor which runs underground and opens out under the floor of the end stable. I've often used that particular entrance, so I haven't needed a door-key to the manor." Mr. Mallory gave a dry chuckle at his own joke.

He followed close behind Jan as she stepped into the narrow passage which ran parallel to the wall of the library. Heart sinking, she knew that he'd passed beyond reason.

"I suppose it was you who knocked me out when I went to find out about the light in the stable?" she asked.

"Of course! That was your own fault for prying," he remonstrated like a kindly uncle. "Stan Greaves wasn't too happy about it, but I couldn't take any risks. Time was very short."

Some way ahead a dim glow grew steadily brighter and illuminated the passage.

"I only realized how short when you blurted out today that you were expecting a mysterious visitor."

"Mr. Grayling?"

"Of course. I suddenly remembered every detail of that evening years ago. When I left Linton he was obviously longing to get back to his stamps again. It dawned on me that he must have left the paper in among his collection and by this evening you and everyone else would know the truth."

Jan swung to face him, her face radiant with relief in the orange-tinted shadows. "Mr. Grayling knows about the loan! He guessed it was genuine. So if anything happens to Ricky or me, he'll know who's at the bottom of it!"

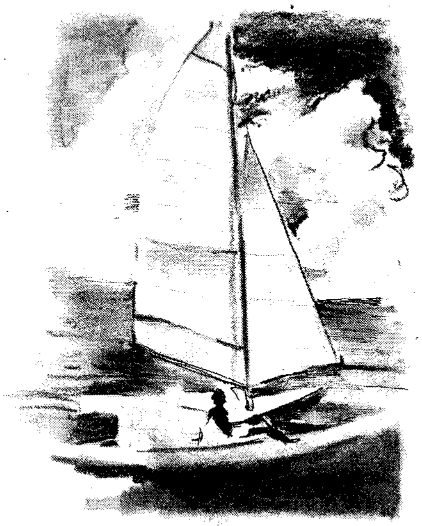
Mr. Mallory looked at her almost pityingly, his features heavy. "Do you think I'd let an old fool like him stand between me and my farm—now I've got this far? A little accident will be easy enough to arrange!"

Jan backed away. The man was crazy. She had to escape. Darting forwards, she kicked his shin as hard as she could. He shouted with pain and instinctively bent to clutch his leg. Twisting away, Jan ran for her life. She'd reached a small cellar now and saw the dim light had come from an oil lamp standing on the floor. There was no door, just two dark openings leading into the unknown.

Jan darted into the nearest. She'd no idea where it led. It seemed to slope gradually downwards and was pitch black. She heard her pursuer cursing behind her and, as he stopped to pick up the lantern, its faint glimmer showed gray stone walls beaded with damp green mildew, stretching into the impenetrable darkness in front of her.

Groping blindly forward, she hurried as much as she dared, but progress was slow for fear of twisting her ankle on the dirt-packed floor. The man grunting only yards behind her would be merciless. By now Jan had no doubt that Paul's father meant to kill her. Obsessed with a fanatical love of the farm, his mind had become completely unhinged. Somehow she had to get away and find Ricky. How to tackle Stan Greaves was something she'd worry about when the time came.

Where was Ricky? He couldn't be down here—this must be a trick. Surely Stan wouldn't hurt him, wherever he was. Jan had a terrible feeling that only daylight and rescue could bring her the answers. And what terrors would Ricky have gone through by then?



Feverishly, Jan's hands scrabbled along the rough walls, unaware as stones tore her fingers. But at last she saw faint light ahead. The moon was sending pale lemon beams through chinks in the roof of the tunnel. The path climbed upwards. She stumbled and fell. Steps. Cautiously, Jan felt each stone slab with her foot before risking her full weight. Mr. Mallory was lagging behind, panting noisily, and she made the most of her advantage, pressing forwards as quietly as possible.

The last few steps were so steep she had to clamber up on hands and knees. Heart plummeting she felt the stone wall in front of her. A dead end! No . . . above the stairs was a trapdoor, outlined by slivers of moonlight, heralding escape. Pushing upwards with all her might, Jan despaired of moving the heavy wooden hatch, but, after what seemed an age, she managed to shift it aside, making a gap just wide enough to wriggle through. Grabbing the ledge, she painfully levered herself up, pushing both feet against the walls on each side. Scrambling through the narrow slit, Jan lay for a moment, cheek pressed to the ground, gasping. Then all her instincts urged her to secure the trapdoor and weigh the whole thing down as quickly as she could. Charles Mallory had just reached the foot of the steps and was beginning to mount them.

She slid the wooden square quickly across the opening, but there was no way of fastening it. Something heavy. What could she use? Moonlight showed curved stone walls and slit windows. She wasn't completely surprised to find herself in the little look-out tower on the headland. Somehow her subconscious mind had mapped the course of the underground tunnel, making it quite likely that she'd been moving towards the sea.

Feverishly, Jan hunted on the ground just outside the low doorway and her hands fastened on several heavy slabs of stone which had fallen from the walls with the passage of years. She dragged them to the trapdoor, using a strength lent to her by fear, then collapsed breathless, listening to the angry hammering from below. At last it stopped. The only sound to be heard was the murmur of surf curling over black rocks far below and the labored pounding of her own heart.

After a brief rest, Jan stood up wearily and started down the path that led to the comparative safety of the harbor. But in her relief at gaining a respite from Charles Mallory, she forgot to take care. An unwary step, a jutting rock, and she tripped. Falling headlong, Jan put out a hand to save herself, but an agonizing pain shot through her ankle and she was unconscious even before the full weight of her body hit the ground.

When Jan opened her eyes the night sky was still dark, pinpointed here and there by a diamond of light. The heavens seemed to have set out their best array of jewelry for this charade, she thought. Obstacles confronted her at every turn and now to cap it all she had to contend with an ankle that was badly wrenched, or even broken. The little tower a few yards away looked comfortingly familiar, so she decided to crawl back there and plan her next move. Every yard was an agony and by the time she reached the tower, perspiration was streaking her brow, mingled with a few tired tears.

Once inside the tower Jan unstrapped her sandal with some difficulty because her ankle was already swelling rapidly. She found a handkerchief in the pocket of her jeans and wound it round her foot as a makeshift bandage. It was the best that could be done, she thought dejectedly, as fatigue swept over her. She propped herself against the stone wall, waiting for the waves of pain to subside.

Quietly, almost dispassionately, she considered her next move. The obvious thing was to drag herself down the headland track and make straight for Chapters, Louise and the police. But she knew Mallory would be waiting somewhere down there, between herself and safety.

Pressing shaking fingers to her head, she wondered what was happening to Ricky. Dear heaven, if he'd been harmed! But in the wilderness of tunnels beneath the manor she'd never find him without help. And somehow she knew she hadn't seen the last of Charles Mallory. It wasn't going to be that simple.

As if Jan's thoughts had transmitted themselves to him, there came to her ears the cracking of ferns and bracken as someone made their way slowly up the path towards the little tower. Jan peered carfully through a window, then ducked back quickly. Mallory!

Berating herself for not finding a better hiding place, Jan flung herself to the ground and, using elbows and knees, slithered through the doorway and propelled herself towards the concealing undergrowth. Just in time she crouched beneath a tangle of leaves and briars as Mr. Mallory topped the path and looked inside the tower. Finding it empty, except for the tell-tale sandal she'd discarded, he came out and looked around.

"Mrs. Reynolds," he shouted. "I know you're there. Come out and we'll talk."

He listened. Jan lay still, scarcely daring to breathe.

"Mrs. Reynolds," he shouted again. "There's only one path leading from here and I've been waiting for you. There's no point in hiding."

Glancing up, he seemed to realize that time was running out because the dark clouds of night were slowly dispersing. Before long the sun would rise and, soon afterwards, the holidaymakers. Even now there was every chance of a fishing boat sailing into the harbor, or even a lone angler clambering across the rocks. Cursing loudly, he moved towards the bracken, lashing furiously with the stout stick he carried. A triumphant shout was Jan's only warning as he caught sight of her white jumper.

A hand grasped her shoulder. Hauling her upright, his face showed insane glee. "So there you are, my dear!"

Again, Jan took him by surprise as she hurled all her weight against him. Losing her own balance at the same time, they both crashed in a heap among the tearing bracken. Before Mr. Mallory could regain his wits, Jan wriggled away, but his hand shot out and clamped on her wrist. Biting his finger furiously, Jan pushed herself violently backwards as he shouted obscenities at her and let go his hold.

But as she dragged herself full-length across the hard-packed earth, Jan's feet suddenly felt the ground disappear beneath her. Horror-stricken, her desperate hands grabbed for a hold. She had slithered part-way down the cliff. Nothing stood between her and a sheer drop down to the rocks where she'd been stranded only a few weeks ago.

Closing her eyes, Jan sent up a small prayer. If anything happened to her what would Ricky do? And she had to save herself, if only to find out what Stan had done with him. Clawing wildly, she grasped thick tussocks of grass and felt cautiously for a foothold with her uninjured leg.

◆

Like Dian's kiss, unasked, unsought,
Love gives itself, but is not bought.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
Endymion

Mr. Mallory was on the brink of the cliff, above her, his red face looking down with a diabolical smile. He began beating the cliff face with his stick, sending showers of dust and rubble towards Jan. "This is where we say good-bye, Mrs. Reynolds."

"Help! Help!" Jan let out an anguished scream as the dust blinded her. "Somebody, please help!" How long could she hold on, she wondered in an agony of despair?

A dog started barking furiously on the clifftop. Then a louder, hoarse cry drowned Jan's. Suddenly, crashing through the air, Charles Mallory, arms and legs flailing, hurtled towards the jagged rocks below.

The next moment Adam Dexter's voice spoke quietly. "You're safe, Jan. Don't move, my darling. I'm coming to get you."

After that, everything passed in a blur for Jan. Dimly she was aware of voices above her head and of Adam being lowered down the cliff face. She felt him fastening strong ropes about her waist, murmuring reassuringly all the time. Seconds later, he was holding her tightly as they were carefully winched upwards and willing hands helped them to safety. Police and coastguards were moving around there in the dawn shadows, issuing and obeying brief commands.

Adam lowered Jan gently to the ground, then ran expert hands over her body. When he touched the injured ankle she gasped with pain. Unbelievably he winced, too, his eyes filled with the sort of concern she'd never dreamed he could feel, especially for her.

"I'm going to take you home, Jan." Adam lifted her in his arms as he'd done once before, a lifetime ago, when he found her unconscious under the big magnolia tree.

"Ricky. I've got to find Ricky." Jan struggled, panic-stricken, face white and pinched, as her swimming senses cleared.

"Ricky is tucked up in bed at Grey Towers. You don't need to worry about him." Adam strode purposefully along the path, holding Jan against his chest. "Stan Greaves brought him to me last night and my housekeeper has instructions not to move from Ricky's side until I get back."

Jan subsided weakly. There were so many questions to be answered, but just for now she'd reached the limit of her endurance. Ricky was safe, somehow she herself was still alive and, for the moment at least, even Adam seemed . . . almost caring. She knew that it was just an illusion, one that would vanish by the time she was back at Chapters, if not before. Still, she cherished its bittersweetness in her heart even while savoring the bliss of being held close to him once more.

Louise's anxious face tried to smile, but failed dismally, when they reached the manor. As soon as Adam had carried Jan upstairs she helped her undress, then gently bathed the multitude of cuts and scratches on Jan's face, arms and feet, while the doctor examined her damaged ankle. Pronouncing it a bad wrench, he strapped it firmly, then, despite Jan's remonstrances, insisted on her swallowing two white tablets.

"You've an ankle that's going to throb, m'dear, and you've had enough adventures to suffer a certain amount of shock. A few hours' good sound sleep'll make a new woman out of you." His kindly tones soothed Jan and she started to feel drowsy even before he and Louise left the room.

The sun was shining brightly through the chintz-framed window when she awoke. For a moment she lay still. The events of the previous night came crowding back, making her tense with dismay as she relived its ugly drama.

The stealthy opening of her door created a welcome diversion. Louise popped her head around the crack and, seeing Jan awake, advanced into the room, smiling.

"How are you feeling, love?" She perched on the edge of the bed and, leaning forward, placed a cool hand on Jan's forehead.

"A bit stiff and achey. That's all," Jan reassured her. "And full of so many questions."

The biggest question of all she couldn't bring herself to ask, but Louise guessed, and in her most matter-of-fact voice, answered it.

Mr. Mallory was dead. "You owe your life to Adam's dog because he went onto the headland, too. Stan helped search the tunnels, then decided the look-out tower was the next place to look for you. Prince recognized your voice shouting for help, started barking, and went for Mallory. Mallory stepped back and overbalanced. He must have been killed the instant he hit the rocks."

"And Paul?" whispered Jan.

A shadow crossed Louise's face. "Paul knows the whole story—the loan agreement was found in his father's pocket and we all guessed the rest." Her even tone faltered. "He's pretty shattered, but he'll get over it in time. You'll see." Her voice carried such conviction that Jan felt oddly relieved.

"But how did Adam become involved?" she insisted.

Louise stood up and smoothed the bedclothes where she'd been sitting. "Adam is coming to see you later and he'll fill you in on the details. He took Ricky to school this morning because we thought it best to keep things as normal as possible. I expect he'll call in when he brings your son and heir home later this afternoon."

She stood, hands on hips, looking down at Jan. "A good meal is what you need, old love."

Jan certainly did feel better after the appetizing lunch Louise carried upstairs. Afterwards she leaned back against the pillows and dozed a little. As the time drew near for Adam to bring Ricky home, though, she decided to get up, wanting to make light of her mishap for the child's sake and knowing too, that, bathed and dressed, she'd feel better equipped to face Adam.

Feeling so much better physically, Jan was uneasily aware of the maelstrom of thoughts whirling in her head, questions to do with Paul, with Adam, with the future.

Bathing was difficult and painful because of her tightly strapped ankle, sore hands and the mass of scratches and grazes criss-crossing her limbs. Louise came upstairs again and, scolding Jan soundly for getting up, none the less helped her slip into a lemon-yellow summer dress. After rebandaging the torn hands she brushed Jan's hair so that it fell softly to her shoulders. Seating her in an armchair, she lifted both Jan's legs on to a padded stool before standing back to survey the invalid critically.

"Hm. You still look pale, but you'll do," she pronounced. "Like a sweet little girl who needs looking after. Sure you wouldn't be better spending the rest of today in bed?"

Jan shook her head, for she knew the sooner she faced Adam the better. Her cheeks warmed as she remembered last night. Had she imagined that he'd called her 'my darling'? He'd been so tender, almost loving, as he carried her home. Several times his arms had tightened almost involuntarily around her and his lips had brushed her temple. Deep-set eyes had dwelt on her almost broodingly as he finally left her in the care of Louise and the doctor, as if reluctant to go.

A magazine lay neglected in Jan's lap as she stared unseeingly out of the window and began piecing together the jigsaw that had finally dropped its last piece into their lap with Mr. Grayling's visit. The only gleam of comfort was Stan's loyalty in the end.

"Mummy!" The door burst open and Ricky hurtled across the room, satchel flying,hair tousled."Louise said you'd fallen over and hurt your foot. Are you all right?"

Relieved to see Jan sitting comfortably by the window, looking much the same as usual, he gave the bandaged ankle a cursory inspection, then embarked on the story of his own adventures.

"I've had a smashing time! Stan came last night when I was in bed and took me to Grey Towers. Did you know we were going? You didn't tell me." Without waiting for a reply, he rattled on, leaning against Jan as she watched, amused and grateful to find him untouched by the night's terrors. Things might have been very different if Charles Mallory's plans had gone well. She shuddered slightly, but Ricky didn't notice. Instead he launched into a vivid description of his overnight stay at the hotel. He'd eaten a second supper in bed. "And a nice granny sort of a lady read to me till I fell asleep."

Today he'd breakfasted with Adam Dexter. "And d'you know what? Adam sent Prince to wake me up. He jumped on my bed and licked me." Ricky gave a hoot of laughter that was all the more infectious because he'd only recently lost his two front teeth and the wide gap was oddly appealing. "Adam's all right, you know, Mummy. He's not horrid at all."

"Adam?" prompted his mother curiously.

"Oh, he said I was to call him Adam and wouldn't it be a good idea if we were friends—himself, me and Prince," explained Ricky with a fine disregard for grammar.

"We could always include your mother in the list of friends," a male voice suggested from the doorway.

They looked up, startled. Jan felt a betraying blush stain her cheeks as Adam came into the room and stood looking down at her, an inscrutable expression in his eyes. Soft breezes through the open window ruffled her hair and she took the opportunity to lower her face, brushing the curls back with a bandaged hand.

Adam's gaze didn't leave her as he relayed a message to Ricky.

"Louise says your tea is ready if you're feeling hungry."

"Not half!" With a whoop, Ricky banged out of the room, leaving behind him a silence as fragile as a butterfly's wing.

At last Adam broke it, though his eyes continued their keen scrutiny of Jan's softly-flushed face. Hooking a chair towards him with one foot, he sat down, barely a yard away, and casually hitched up his slacks with their well-defined creases.

"Louise tells me you're feeling better and ready to ask a lot of questions. How about starting off by telling me what happened to you?"

Briefly, Jan narrated the events of the previous day, including what later had proved to be a momentous meeting with the Mallorys when she and Louise were driving back from lunch at the hotel.

"That was what triggered the whole thing off," she explained. "Paul's father guessed Mr. Grayling had come across the agreement and knew I'd find out about Mr. Linton's loan all those years ago. Mr. Mallory was beside himself, wanting to protect his farm at all costs. Even if it meant getting rid of poor old Mr. Grayling as well as me."

Adam filled the pause, his lean face thoughtful.

"He knew Louise was out, so he told Stan Greaves to grab Ricky as a precaution, in the hope of buying your silence. Then he realized it still couldn't work and decided to get rid of you once and for all."

"But why did Stan bring Ricky to you?" Jan was puzzled. "Mr. Mallory was paying him to help drive us away—and he knew enough about Stan's shady deals to make sure he didn't step out of line."

"Stan decided to take the consequences and opt out of Mallory's nasty games," Adam explained. "He's enough of a scoundrel to enjoy a bit of skulduggery on the side, but he'd taken a fancy to you and Ricky, thoroughly disliked frightening you and told Mallory so. He was sickened—and worried stiff—when Mallory went ahead without him. Like you, he realized Mallory would stop at nothing—not even murder."

"Mr. Mallory admitted it was he who hit me on the head by the stables. He must have tampered with the brakes of my car and started the fire as well." Jan glanced up, shamefaced. "I'm sorry. I owe you an apology. I said some terrible things to you that night."

"You owe me nothing. You were quite right to suspect that someone was working hard to get you away from here. Who could be a more likely candidate than me?" His expression altered subtly. "Still, if you insist on having wronged me, I'm willing to let you make amends."

Jan looked at him with a question in her eyes. "What can I do?"

"You can marry me, live with me, love me, have children with me!"

Jan's face was a study as her mouth parted in a soft murmur of amazement. "You're making fun of me. How can you be so cruel?" She didn't care that her words acknowledged his power to hurt her.

Adam took one startled look at the pain-clouded eyes. Moving swiftly and contritely, he picked Jan up and, sitting down in her armchair, cradled her in his arms.

"Don't look like that, my love. It's far from being a joke." His slight smile was self-mocking. "I was teasing because I was scared to be serious—in case you said no. But I meant every word. The only way you can put things right is by marrying me." His lips brushed Jan's forehead, traveled down her tip-tilted nose, then moved to caress grazed cheeks that had lost their rosy flush now and turned creamy pale.

"But you think I'm an idiot . . . a nuisance," managed Jan in a strangled whisper. "And what about Louise? She's just right for you. You spend endless time with her. And she's so glamorous." Her words came faster and faster, culminating in a pathetic wail.

Adam's mouth hardened almost ruthlessly as he sensed her momentary withdrawal. "No. You're just right for me." Vibrantly masculine, his searching lips slipped from Jan's cheek to fasten determinedly on her mouth. Softly, insistently, they coaxed a response that grew to a crescendo, startling them both in its complete and rapturous surrender. Incredulous delight flashed into Adam's eyes as, reassured by the unmistakable message conveyed by his lips, Jan slipped her bandaged hands around his neck and gave herself wholeheartedly into his keeping.

Some time later she raised her ruffled curls from Adam's shoulder and looked at him with bemused eyes. "Adam. Why me?"

A smoldering gaze ran possessively over the slender body held securely in the curve of his arm. "Why do I love you, you mean? Why am I completely fascinated by you? Why do I lie awake at night being tormented by the dislike you always show me?"

"Something like that." She rubbed her warm cheek against his, delighting in the masculine fragrance emanating from him, the dark hair trying to curl along the back of his collar, the sheer joy of being held close as if he'd never let her go again.

"Well, I suppose it started the moment we met, when you stood and defied me with those big gray eyes and that ridiculous ponytail," he reflected. "I was irritated to think you'd got the better of me. And I was mad as the devil when you decided to keep Chapters—I realized even then that you'd got under my skin, even though I wouldn't admit it."

"Chapters. What shall we do about it?" Jan asked. "If we . . . that is—" She broke off, suddenly shy.

"When we get married, you mean," Adam finished for her, smiling with such a warmth in his eyes that Jan couldn't stop looking at him in wonder. "Would you like us to live here and run Grey Towers purely as a business?" he suggested. White teeth glinted as, with an oblique glance, he considered aloud. "I suppose you'd suspect my motives if I suggested we ran a path from the hotel to the harbor, through the manor grounds?"

"Oh, you. You were determined to get your way in the end."

Jan pretended to glare, then started laughing as he looked momentarily disconcerted. It was wonderful to know that even Adam could feel unsure of himself sometimes.

My Heart Went To The Circus

by Lenore Mannon

My heart went to the circus,
Trembled on the tightrope,
Cavorted with the clowns,
Swept from swing to swing on the high trapeze,
Then lay unnoticed in the sawdust
When the circus left town.

She sobered suddenly. "I've been thinking about that wretched money Mr. Mallory borrowed. Knowing Paul, I've a strong feeling he'll insist on paying it back. And the only way he can do that is by selling the farm." Her face was quietly determined. "Adam, I don't want the money. I've managed perfectly well without it all this time."

Adam nodded in agreement. "The best thing is for me to insist you won't need it now; we're getting married. Paul knows I've more than enough to keep a wife and a ready-made son. We'll make it our wedding present to him and Louise."

Jan sat bolt upright, eyes wide. "Paul and Louise?"

"Not just yet, maybe. Paul's had a big shock and it'll take him a while to get over it. Louise will help him." Adam looked at Jan, amused. "Did you never guess?"

"There were always sparks when they met," Jan reflected, "but I can see it might have been a sign of some sort of magnetism. I thought they thoroughly disliked each other, though they'd softened up a bit recently. Maybe Louise sensed that Paul was going to be the man to topple her independence. And it took him quite a long time to see beneath the surface glamour." She smiled happily. "Anyway, I was convinced you'd already booked Louise for yourself."

"I enjoyed her company and I wanted her to enjoy some social life here, so she wouldn't be tempted back to town so soon, leaving you on your own."

Understanding flashed into Jan's eyes. "Now I know who sent me those lovely clothes after the fire. It was you, wasn't it? And Louise helped you choose the right sizes." She hugged him, but Adam didn't seem to mind.

"It was a good feeling, buying you presents, even though you'd have flung them back at me if you'd known where they came from." Adam frowned. "That was a bad night. When you disappeared with Paul at the barn dance I got really worried—I hoped you were just friends, but it didn't stop me being jealous."

Adam ran his hand down the side of Jan's face and touched her lower lip. His face darkened as she kissed the tip of his finger and smiled straight into his eyes.

"Jan, you haven't said you'll marry me." Huskily he added, "Is that because you know I won't give you the chance to do anything else?"

"I'll marry you and live with you and love you and have all those children with you," she promised rashly, blushing furiously as she met the deepening passion of his gaze.

Adam's lips tightened for a moment as he looked at the bandaged hands cradled against his chest, and the cuts on her face and arms. Then he seized her hungrily, as if he could never have enough of her.

The perils hidden in the shadows of the manor vanished forever, like a bad dream, as Jan gave herself up to the ecstasy of ardent kisses and caressing hands. With Adam, she and Ricky could walk together into tomorrow's happiness. ◆

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by Wynne Paul

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An unforgettable antebellum novel

THE STONE GARDEN

by Marion Clarke

Who was the notorious "Frenchman," Charlotte asked herself? She only knew he was a friend to all slaves, and enemy of all the Southerners she depended on—and that she had never met a man who intrigued her more.

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Toast To Milady

"Cheers!" to you and your loved ones for the whole new year

The feast was spread. A score of guests sat in front of the heavily laden carved table, shining platters, and sparkling, crystal stemmed glasses. Goose, turkey, yams and puddings, fruits and sauces, were generously arranged around each of the guests' plates, with flagons of wine in the center of the table.

Charles drew in his breath in anticipation. He felt he had waited a long year for this celebration. At last, New Year's Eve, with his good friends and family. Yes, his mother was there, and he could see in her eyes the same anticipation and the same delight at the beginning of the evening. Tomorrow would be the first day of the new year, the first of the year 1881, and Charles knew, with an uncanny certainty that it would be the best year of his life. He was young, he was in love; his farm was prospering and, above all, he was English. It would be a wonderful year for him, and for Claudia, if she would have him.

He stood up in front of the large oak table and raised his crystal champagne glass to the company. His handsome face was softened by the shadows the candlelight cast and his eyes twinkled in merriment. Gently, he placed his hand on Claudia's shoulder. She smiled up at him and quickly he winked at her.

Garth lifted his silver spoon and struck the crystal goblet, sending tinkling sounds through the room. "I believe," he said in a loud and serious voice, "I believe that our friend Charles wishes to have our attention."

"I do, I do," Charles chuckled, his face showing traces of his embarrassment. "I am not comfortable standing here and speaking before so many distinguished guests," he began, clearing his throat. "But . . . but, I wish to honor a fair young lady . . . by a pledge tonight. A woman so lovely, so charming, and so gentle that I must confess . . ." he hesitated again, "I must confess I love her dearly and I wish to toast her."

By Alicia Martin

"Gentlemen! Sirs! I say we shall all toast the women!"

"To the women!" the crowd of men repeated. "To all the women!"

Smolett stood up at the table and faced Charles. He raised his goblet high into the air and waved his other arm, gesturing around the room. "Let every man toast his wife! I say, let every man toast his fairest maid, his loveliest lassy!"

"Why, sir," Geoffrey began, leaning forward in his chair, trying to interrupt the voices. "Why do we use the word 'toast' like a crust of bread? How on earth did this strange custom come about?"

Charles' eyes scanned the faces at the table. Dressed in silks and brocades, draped with shawls and feathers, the women looked so lovely—lovelier than he had ever seen them. Indeed, the merriment and the wine had a blooming effect on them. The candlelight reflected in the cut crystal glasses shed a rosy tint throughout the room. Tall, silvered mirrors in ornate gold frames threw shards of light from the candelabra onto the glossy wooden floor.

"The ladies have the same effect on me as the sweet toast has when I drink my tea. They are the better part of the liquor. They are the balm of my spirit, the satisfaction of my appetite, the accompaniment to my drink."

"Indeed, they are the toast!" Garth proclaimed. "The toast of the table."

"But why?" Geoffrey pressed. "Why the toast?"

Then Smollett took his turn, lifting his glass high above the silver platters of duck and goose and said in a clear voice. "This is how it happened, gentlemen. And though I know it not for certain, I do believe it to be true. As you know, when we drink ale or tea, we put pieces of toast or bread in our drink."

"We know how we drink our tea and ale, Smollett! Get on with the story."

"Yes, yes. So, during Charles II's reign there seems to have been another custom, the custom of taking public baths—they weren't so fortunate as we . . . or perhaps they were more fortunate! And, on Public Day—you know the fair day—in the town of Bath, a young maiden was bathing. She was a lovely young woman, they say, the fairest in the town, and she had many admirers. It happened that, as she was standing in her bath water, a crowd drew around her."

"A fair young maiden in a bath? Ho, sir!"

"So admired was this one young woman," Smollett continued, unperturbed, "that the young gentlemen began to cheer her. One of them was so overcome with admiration that he dipped his drinking glass into the bath water she was standing in and drank of it."

"He *must* have loved her," Garth said. "Else he had been at the fair too long."

"Perhaps, but the young woman was virtuous and a lady and the most popular one in the town. The ruckus began when all the other gentlemen joined in. With great merriment, they dipped their cups and glasses into the water and threw the liquid down their throats. ‘Such a bonny lass,’ one cried out. ‘Bonny today, and bonnier on the morrow,’ another shouted, dipping his glass into the water again. ‘May she be healthy and lovely forever and forever. And ‘You sweeten this water like the toast sweetens the tea,’ others called to her.

“But one young man refrained from drinking, until he was reprimanded. ‘What ho! You, sir! Will you not dip your cup in the young lady’s bath? Will you not taste of this fine liquor?’

“Well, the gent was a bit befuddled. He had been drinking ale at the fair all day and, for sure, was about to plunge himself into the lady’s bath, but the others stopped him. Be that as it may, as he attempted to take the plunge, he was saying, ‘Sir, though I care not for the liquor, I will gladly have the toast.’ ”

“Toast! The lady was the toast of the town!” Geoffrey said, laughing, and raised his glass. “To all the fair young ladies tonight, I raise my glass. Here’s to your good health and to your families’ health. May you live long and prosper.”

“Here! Here!” Smollett clapped his hands.

“Sirs, good sirs,” Claudia began. “Every married man may toast his wife, but I, I toast to every man—to fellows—glorious or odious!”

“To fellows!” the women at the table burst out. “To good fellows, to good friends.”

Garth struck his glass again, causing others to do the same. “Silence! Silence! I wish to make a toast, too,” he said, rising from his seat. The other men and women lowered their arms and slowly sat down.

“Here’s to the maiden of bashful fifteen;
Here’s to the widow of fifty;
Here’s to the flaunting, extravagant queen,
And here’s to the housewife that’s thrifty.
Let the toast pass—
Drink to the lass:
I’ll warrant she’ll prove an excuse for the glass!”

“Made that up, did you, Garth? Aren’t you a clever one!” Claudia said.

“Well,” Garth blushed, “I did have the help of that old codger Robert Sheridan. It’s his toast—but a good one, yes?”

“Well, we can all make up a toast!”

“Here! Here’s to women! If only we could fall into their arms without falling into their clutches!”

“Would that men had arms strong enough to hold us!” Evelyn replied, challenging the men.

“Here’s one for you, sweet Evelyn. ‘To love and to champagne! . . .’ ” Geoffrey waved his glass . . . “ ‘For the feeling of friendship is like that of being comfortably filled with roast beef; and love, like being enlivened with champagne.’ ”

“Isn’t that Samuel Johnson? Or is that yours?” Evelyn asked Geoffrey, a knowing twinkle in her eyes.

“Eat, drink, and be merry!” Charles raised his glass. “We have worked hard all year, and are surrounded by friends, good fellows, lovely ladies, —and my dear Claudia, my sister Annette, clever Evelyn, and, of course, Mama.”

“Drink to your love and drink to your friends, for there is nothing on earth of sweeter flavor than affection.” Annette continued for him, softly saying the words as she rose from her chair. “And let us touch glasses in the spirit of the season.”

“Rise,” Charles said. “And good cheer!”

“To our health, our future, to our happiness.”

“We ruin our health drinking *to it!*” Geoffrey joined in.

“Then,” Charles began, hushing everyone. “Then I propose a toast to my lovely fiancée, though she has yet to accept my hand.” He looked closely at Claudia, whose eyes were clouding with tears. “I borrow this one from Ben Jonson, but it is in my heart, too.”

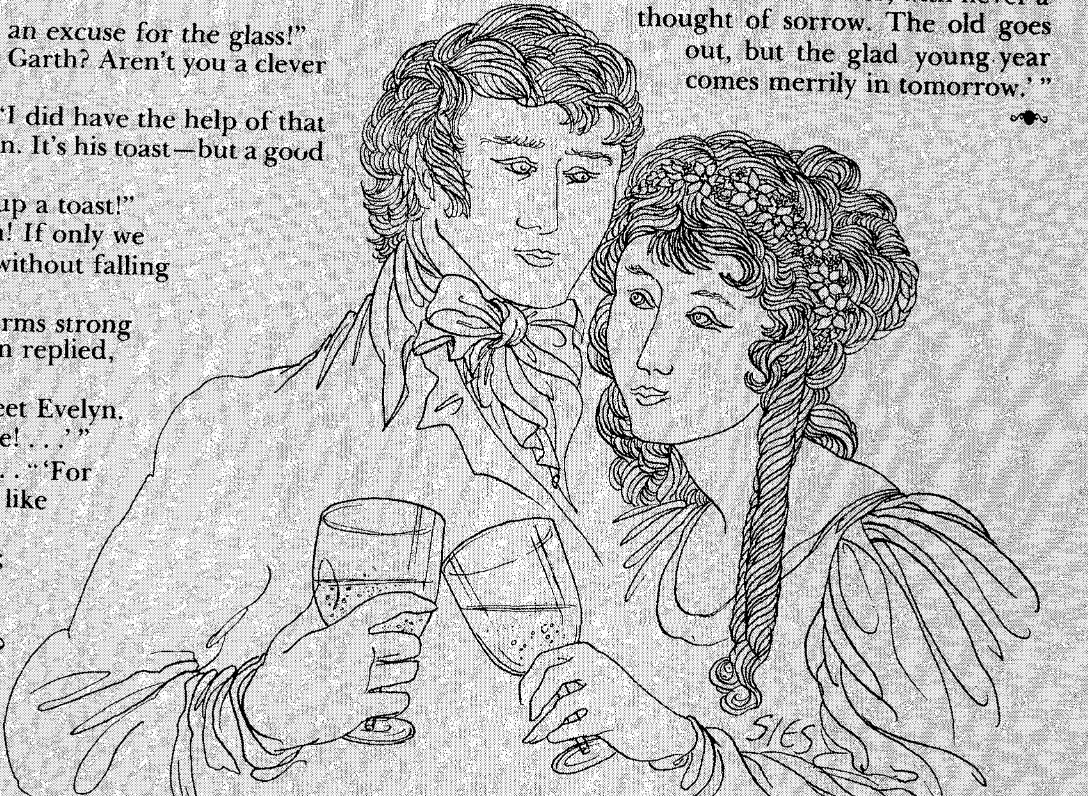
“Charles,” Claudia whispered.

“ ‘Drink to me only with thine eyes,’ ” he began. “ ‘And I will pledge with mine; Or leave a kiss but in the cup, and I’ll not look for wine.’ ”

“To my dear, my dear and only love,” Claudia replied, in the silent and hushed room. “I shall be the happiest woman ever to become a bride. If I have you, then I need nothing else.”

The table of diners was silent, the room was still, and the candles burned and flickered. Shadows fell on the guests, and music swept through the room.

“Before we bid good-night,” Charles’ mother began, “may I make a wish for all of us for the new year. It is my wish, but it is a borrowed wish, from the poet Emily Huntington Miller. I mean it truly, and I say, ‘Sing young hearts that are full of cheer, with never a thought of sorrow. The old goes out, but the glad young year comes merrily in tomorrow.’ ”



Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

Dolley!

(Continued from page 15)

idential campaign is at an end and things will settle down now."

Irving, ever eager to annoy the pompous Burr, could not resist. "Indeed, it is over. By the way, Burr, have you had the good fortune to meet our new secretary of state, James Madison, and his charming wife Dolley?"

Silence. Aaron Burr's eyes remained quietly fixed on the fur blanket covering his knees. Then, almost imperceptibly, through what Washington Irving perceived to be tensely pursed lips, the reply, "Yes," passed from Aaron Burr's lips. The two men settled in for the long ride north as snow gently began to fall on the roads of southern New Jersey.

In 1807 Aaron Burr's house at the junction of Prince and Charlton streets had gained the reputation of being one of the finest in New York City. This three-story, red-brick building designed in the Federal style, with its enormous glass-paned windows on three sides, provided passersby with views of Burr's vistors and legal clients, famous and infamous, in a never-ending procession at once both startling and arresting.

"There she is!" came the cries from the street outside. "Finally, she is here. Dolley, Dolley Madison!"

Dolley heard the sound of her name through the closed windows and turned to salute the crowd in the street.

"Come out to us, Mrs. Madison! Come and speak with us!" Dolley, after receiving an approving glance from James, threw a heavy cloak over her light blue gown and turned to walk to the door.

"No, James, don't bother helping me with the hood."

"But the November chill, Dolley!"

Dolley smiled ."But they wish to see me James, and they will wish to vote for you. We have nothing to hide, after all." She swept out onto the steps of Burr's house to greet the cheering crowd.

"Why are you in New York, Dolley?" a voice called out.

"Oh, come now, you know full well why I am here," she said and laughed. "You all know. President Jefferson's term is at an end, and James Madison—my husband—shall be his successor; that is, if you will take my recommendation and cast your votes for him!"

The sudden burst of hurrahs from the men in the crowd left no doubt that Madison—or rather, the Madisons—had firm support in Manhattan. Indeed, wherever Dolley and James had gone, the public had fallen solidly behind them in the race for the presidency. James would appear but would barely have a chance to speak before the audience would call for Dolley, and she, standing demurely a step or two below him on the platform (Dolley stood a full nine inches taller than he), would rise and wave to the crowd, her rosy, full cheeks radiating warmth and joy, her raven-black curls gently lifted by the wind.

"My husband," she would begin, "has served this nation well as secretary of state these past eight years . . ." And she would go on enthusiastically proclaiming her husband's virtues. The crowds, were with her from the first. It seemed as though the very sight of Dolley was enough to decide their votes.

In Massachussetts, Abigail Adams greeted her joyfully but warned, "My dear Dolley, do you *really* want to go down to that awful 'White House'? There are not nearly enough bell pulls to call for the servants, and the drafts—my heavens, there never seemed to be enough firewood to keep us warm during those miserable winters!"

"Mrs. Adams," Dolley replied, looking the older woman full in the face, "I go with my husband. And, if he is elected to serve this nation, I shall do my utmost to serve with him to the best of my own meager abilities."

When James was elected and came to the swampy district that was Washington, he brought along with him the nation's first First Lady.

America's first Inaugural Ball, planned down to the finest detail by Dolley Madison, was an astounding success.

◆

The course of true love never did run smooth.

William Shakespeare
A Midsummer-Night's Dream

The "White House," formerly host to an odd assortment of political stragglers, now became the political and social center of the entire country.

Not for nothing had Dolley sat admiring the speckled sunlight on her satin gown that afternoon so long ago in Philadelphia. Now, with the prestige of the highest national office in the land behind her, she swept the White House clean of the odd assortment of furniture and souvenirs sent to past presidents by hearty well-wishers. Suddenly, the walls were satin covered in that sultry gold of an early autumn sunset. Complementing the walls were the coordinated tones of silk-covered furniture commissioned from the finest Southern craftsmen.

Finally, the United States indeed had a *capital*. Swamps were drained, roads built and laid down in a plan similar to that of Paris (which was after all the greatest city in the modern world), and diplomats from abroad began to arrive with enthusiasm. After all, who could not be enthusiastic at the prospect of meeting such a charming woman as Dolley Madison?

Here, for once, was a woman who never forgot a face; a woman in whom one could confide personal problems as well as problems of state with equal confidence; a woman who had the ear of the leader of the newest and most energetic nation on earth.

"The portrait! For God's sake take down that portrait!"

Flames were already visible on the northern horizon—Baltimore was literally going up in smoke.

"Mrs. Madison, your wardrobe," her servant insisted.

"Bother my wardrobe! Don't you realize that everything this nation stands for must be preserved? Since when have we stood for silks and satins, for lace collars and tortoise combs?" Dolley was in a rage now. British troops had been sighted just north of the city and observers knew that they were to put the torch to the national capital.

"But the furniture—"

"Leave the furniture! Leave it, I say!" Dolley Madison's face was covered with grime; she was soaked in perspiration from her exhausting work. "This government exists on ideas and traditions, not on fashions. Get General Washington's portrait down off that wall at once and pack it under my belongings in the carriage. Get any papers of state that are lying about into the linings of my luggage."

Outside, the sky to the north of the city was already aglow with red. Working quickly, yet among the last to leave the city and cross the Potomac by raft, Dolley Madison was demonstrating the courage and clear-headed thinking that made her the great woman she was.

She was greeted on the opposite shore by the cheers of Americans from every walk of life. Their Dolley had come through once again, setting an example that would perhaps be the most important one of her career.

The Madisons were able to return to Washington two months later. Passing the burnt-out shell of the executive residence day after day, Dolley came to the conclusion that something must be done.

Calling in a crew of workmen at her personal expense, she gave orders. "Gentlemen, it is time to rebuild," she began. These fire-blackened walls have been an eyesore not only for me but for the entire nation. The war is over, so let us begin by putting this White House back in order by making it truly and brilliantly white instead of that dull limestone color."

The rebuilding was finished in record time and (until James and Dolley Madison left the White House to retire to Montpelier, Virginia, three years later) the United States once again was able to feast its eyes on Dolley Madison in the White House she worked so hard to preserve, the virtual center of political and social activity in America from her day forward.

In late May of 1817, Dolley and James crossed the Potomac again, this time to take up residence at Montpelier, the Madison estate in Virginia.

"I must say, Dolley, this certainly is a more appropriate way to travel across the Potomac than the raft that took you across it a couple of years back," James said wistfully.

"Jemmy, a blazing fire at one's back can do wonders." Dolley smiled wryly as she thought of the evacuation under British fire during the War of 1812. "But, my dear," she continued, pulling on her gloves in the winter chill, "we shall finally have some time to ourselves."

"I don't believe it, Dolley! You are actually glad to be rid of Washington forever?"

Dolley Madison slumped back deep into her cushioned seat. "James, I love my country deeply. I also love my social life and make no bones about it. But first and foremost, I love my husband."

James's eyes began to fill with tears as he tried to speak.

"No, Jemmy, please don't say a word," said Dolley as she placed a gloved hand across her husband's lips with the utmost tenderness. For an instant they stared at one another knowingly.

"Jemmy, I love you more deeply than anybody else in this world. And, Lord knows, there is enough in this young nation of ours to take up anyone's attention." Frowning ever so slightly, she went on: "But it has all been for you, my dearest—the parties, the galas, the decorations, the affairs of state."

James was silent for a long time.

Reaching into her reticule for a lace-bordered handkerchief, Dolley suddenly burst out with a stream of words. "But then, my dear, Jefferson wants you to become an administrator at the University of Virginia. And we must get Montpelier in order to receive guests at home, for I am sure we shall have visitors to contend with day after day, and . . ."

James sat back and listened, amused and in love with a lady who, he was positive, was the most wonderful and loving one on earth.

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Editor's Note

In the hearts and minds of most American women, Dorothea Payne remains to this day, the ideal First Lady of the nation. Born in Virginia in 1768, her startling beauty in early childhood quickly earned her the nickname Dolley, which remained with her throughout her life.

When her father decided to give up the lush plantation ways of eighteenth-century Virginia and follow the Quaker mode of life, Dolley went along, going so far as to suffer through a year of marriage to a lawyer, also a Quaker. Within a year of her husband's death, however, she found in James Madison an ideal mate who could help her re-enter high society in the style she had yearned for ever since her father's conversion to the Quaker faith.

Much taller and plumper than her husband, she quickly asserted herself as America's mistress of fashion and style, first in Philadelphia, then in Washington, where she and James Madison moved when the office of secretary of state was bestowed upon her husband in 1801. Very quickly, Dolley became known as one of the shrewdest politicians in Washington; a visit with Dolley Madison, ostensibly purely a social one, quickly turned to talk of politics and politicians. There is no doubt that James Madison's campaign for the presidency in 1807 was helped enormously by his wife's extraordinary knowledge gathered at her own soirees and afternoon teas.

When she became First Lady, she was determined that the White House (so-called because its limestone facing contrasted vividly with the surrounding dark-red-brick buildings) should become the focal point of the nation. Her complete refurbishing, at her own expense, of the dull and drafty mansion's rooms can be compared only to Jacqueline Kennedy's 1960 restoration of the mansion.

Throughout her White House years, Dolley Madison's charm and panache allowed her to become privy to many affairs of state, and, despite the numerous political intrigues in the capital at that time, there is not a single instance of Dolley Madison's ever having led the president or any member of the Congress into a situation of the slightest political compromise or danger.

From 1817, the year of James Madison's relinquishment of presidential office, until his death in 1836, Dolley lived with her husband at his estate at Montpelier, Virginia, transforming this location into the new social center of the four surrounding states, and putting her political skills and knowledge to excellent use by helping Thomas Jefferson set the University of Virginia on a firm foundation during its initial years.

Washington once again welcomed Dolley in 1837 when she returned to reside permanently in the capital after James's death. It was as if she had never left; the public greeted her with the same enthusiasm and high regard demonstrated a score of years earlier. She attended her last official Washington reception when well into her eighties—Sarah Polk was now the official first lady—dressed in a new, daringly low-cut white satin gown.

Her funeral, in 1849, was at Washington's St. John's Episcopal Church. The Church recorded the largest attendance in its history. Even today, nearly a century and a half later, the name Dolley Madison retains a special sense of glamour, faithfulness, and sophistication in the annals of American history. This first true First Lady's standards for behavior and commitment to her country are still greatly admired.

the Beginning of Things to Come

(Continued from page 18)

family opposition, and she had not yet given up; not to self-pity, not to Mrs. Slater's greedy gas meter, not to anything. But she eyed the line snaking along the pavement and felt her spirits plummet.

Chris Tarrant shifted his position slightly, easing one shoulder off the wall, and went back to observing the back view of the girl directly in front of him. It was the only thing worth looking at. She had long, shiny hair which was as brown as newly cut hazel nuts, and her back was straight and possessed of that innate elegance given to only the special girls. He had glimpsed her profile , and it went with the rest of her. An upturned nose, sweeping dark lashes, and a curve of cheek he would like to put down on canvas. He moved again and saw the girl huddle further into her duffel. It was incredibly cold, and already the hotdog vendors were making themselves heard. He leaned against the wall and went on watching the woman while he dreamed impossibly of evenings when he wouldn't have to get in line but could afford the best seat in the Albert Hall.

The very aura of the place drifted out to Lisa as she pulled into the curb, and she was tempted to go on inside herself. But the evening was over—maybe Robert and she were over finally—and she couldn't bear Beethoven tonight. So she edged along the curb, her eyes sharp and assessing. She saw them suddenly, the girl in the duffel coat and the good-looking young man behind her, and she didn't have a moment's hesitation. She frowned slightly. Oh dear, perhaps they weren't even together. Her frown went as quickly as it had come. What matter? What did anything really matter? She liked the look of them both. She liked the girl's glossy head, held high, the pretty tilt to the nose, the long, slim legs. And he, the Byronic type, with his dark curly hair and his clever, handsome face; she liked that, too. They were a pair, a matching pair, no less. She stopped the car and stepped out onto the pavement, her strappy evening shoes suddenly bizarre among the cowboy boots and the college sandals. She smiled at them both, a brief, encouraging smile, and put a ticket into their separate hands, her explanation easy and to the point.

"My husband and I find we are unable to attend this evening's concert. It seemed a pity to waste the tickets. Enjoy it, won't you? Please enjoy it."

And then she was back in the car, driving off too fast, too carelessly. She steadied after a while and was again in perfect control. She wondered where she should go. She couldn't bear the house just yet, and family and friends wouldn't do tonight. She turned left at the park and suddenly knew exactly what she was doing. She hadn't been to the cottage in over a year. Nor had Robert. The lovely cottage that had once been their dream nest, their refuge from life.

She opened the window a little and felt the cool night air rushing in, fanning her hot cheeks. She thought of the young couple in the line and smiled for the first time that evening. It had been a nice feeling giving them the tickets. She gave them a silent toast. To a wonderful concert. To a wonderful evening. And then she put her foot down and drove off into the night.

Chris Tarrant bought coffee during the first intermission and carried the cups carefully from the bar. He smiled down at Joanna, who whispered, "We are the only ones not in evening dress in the whole of the balcony."

He smiled again and said, "Who cares? Who cares about anything on this most magical of nights?" He looked at her, "Do you think she is an itinerant fairy godmother who constantly looks out for music-loving waifs and strays?"

Joanna smiled back and thought he could very well be right. It was a night of magic, surely. The tickets, the music, and Chris himself. Their rapport had been instant, effortless, and she really couldn't bear it if it ended tonight. She was silent, schooling herself to accept what was probably the truth of it. It was a night of magic all right, a Cinderella night, and at the last stroke of the timpani, they would all disappear, and she would be back at Mrs. Slater's, scrabbling for more coins to feed the insatiable gas meter. And all she would have of this wonderful evening would be elusive, fast-fading memories.

She said, "She looked sad, didn't she, almost desperate. She was so beautiful, but it was as if the loveliness was blotted out by the sadness."

Chris Tarrant looked down at her and thought how extraordinary the evening had been. He had been given a surprise ticket for this exclusive Beethoven concert, and although he had known this delightful girl for less than an hour, he felt he was on the threshold of something truly special. He smiled again and shook his head. "It's pure Disney stuff, isn't it?"

Joanna smiled back, glad of their similar thinking. She frowned slightly, her smooth, youthful brow wrinkling.

"I wonder what went wrong—her husband not being able to make it?"

Chris shrugged. "Who knows? I only wish she knew how much we are enjoying it." He regarded the pert, up-tilted nose, the amber-flecked eyes. "How about a coffee later, to discuss the concert and anything else that comes to mind?"

Joanna sat back and wondered why her family had ever had a moment's worry about London. She felt Chris's shoulder against hers as the second half of the program began, and her delight at the whole evening was so great she could have cried. Then she thought fleetingly of the telltale redness in their benefactor's eyes tonight.

TRANSFORMED-TRANSMUTED

by May Richstone

Happy marriages may well
Bid their romance a blithe farewell.

Romance that hinted "Hold me fast
Such intensity can't last,"

That whispered "Danger lurks about me,
Worlds can fall apart without me."

Such romance means haunting fear
Unless it changs year by year

To love that's simpler, surer, saner,
Compassionate, time-tested, plainer.

Transformed, transmuted, romance must
Change to love that love can trust.

Lisa barely recognized the turn-off to the cottage. The hedges were so overgrown that they seemed to be reaching toward each other in an effort to block any traffic. The dusk was thick now, and her headlights picked out the swaying, waist-high grasses and the odd patch of convolvulus lighting up the dark hedgerows. She blinked into the encroaching darkness and thought how familiar it had all once been. She and Robert had walked each step of this road a hundred times or more. And tonight she felt like a stranger. She drew in her breath. She was a stranger. She was a stranger in her own house, here, everywhere. Where did she belong?

She slowed down as she reached the end of the road. The cottage had deteriorated incredibly. It stood like some slightly drunken edifice, leaning toward the denseness of the shrubbery. The wisteria was wanton, rioting not only over the porch but covering the side windows, twining around the gutters.

Lisa parked the car and got out slowly. The flagged path was mossy and ankle-deep in rebellious, out-of-bounds plants, thrusting themselves through the cracks. She heard an owl way off in the dark copse in the long meadow, and she shrank from the memories. It was like being in a dream or watching a play. She seemed outside herself, moving in slow motion, not really registering what was around her. She groped about for the spare key and found it, incredibly, under the third plant pot from the right. She gave no thought to visiting rats or beetles, just opened the front door in this strange, purging, ritual excursion.

She stood in the small, square hall and coughed at the overwhelming smell of dampness. What was she hoping to find? Apart from pneumonia or some other deadly ill? The cottage was a mere remnant of their life together, an abandoned one at that. It was old, dirty, and damp, and it had played no part in their lives for a long time. She closed her eyes and remembered how it used to be. The picnics in the meadow with Robert tickling her bare feet with long, feathery grasses. And the soft, balmy evenings when they listened to the collared doves and wove endless romantic dreams for each other?

Something touched her stockinged toes, and Lisa strangled a scream. Light, she needed a light. She rummaged in her bag and found a book of matches. They were flimsy things, and she wasted three of them before she eventually got enough light to make out the oil lamp on the table. The wick was hard, and there wasn't a hope of any light there. She felt her first flicker of fear. It had been stupid to come down tonight. Tomorrow would have been fine, when the sun would have shone and the larks would have sung. (She much preferred larks to owls at this particular moment.) She began to think about tramps and wondered if Robert would be sorry when he read of her murder in tomorrow's paper.

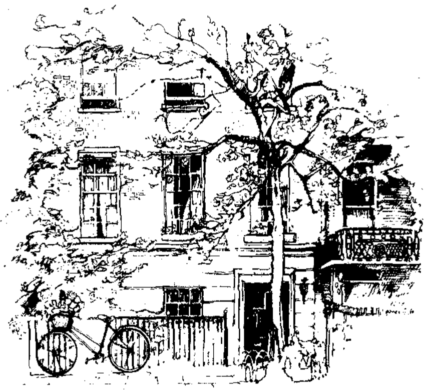
Then she heard the car. A slow engine making its way toward the cottage. Lisa caught her breath. A neighboring farmer maybe, having seen her headlights, investigating? Or police? Or no-good, fly-by-night kids from the local, allegedly notorious commune?

Lisa's legs buckled suddenly and she realized how hungry and tired she was. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, and Robert and she were to have dined at Polenski's after the concert. She heard a little sob in her throat and felt as alone as she could ever remember being. She heard the footsteps on the path and couldn't run, didn't even try, just stood there in the dark and awaited her fate.

Robert, his powerful auto flashlight illuminating the hall from the doorway, regarded his slim, lovely wife and felt his heart turn over. It was partly relief and partly his never-ending optimism that this time he had really and truly found her.

He said gently, "Great minds and all that. I hoped you would think of the cottage."

He didn't move toward her; he wasn't sure she was ready for that yet, but he had seen her eyes with their almost wild welcome in them.



He shone the light around and whistled at the cobwebs, the neglect.

"What a state." He looked back at her. "Lisa, shall we stay overnight? The village pub has a nice room, and then we could come down tomorrow morning and see what's to be done with this place. It would be nice to see it as it was. It's such a waste like this."

Lisa nodded slowly. He was right. It was a waste. Everything was a waste unless it was fostered and nurtured and kept alive.

She looked at Robert and saw the strength of his shoulders and, for a moment, wished she was curled up against them, cradled like a child in his arms.

He smiled across at her, stifling his desire to go to her and take her in his arms. "We'll leave your car here until tomorrow. The pub can offer us pickles and homemade pie. Not quite Polenski's style, but strangely attractive at the moment."

He put an arm lightly about her shoulders as they walked to the car. Tomorrow he would tell her about tonight's late telephone call, the latest long-shot from the adoption agency. There had been so many disappointments, but this one sounded promising. But first he wanted them to regain their own little world, unaided. There was room for hope and new things tomorrow. Tonight, they had to find themselves again.

He reversed the car and drove toward the village. Lisa felt drowsy and safe in the front seat. She knew they'd reached the point of no return tonight, and yet it seemed that they might still miraculously survive after all. The relief was so heady that she felt almost drunk.

Robert looked across at her. "I wonder how the concert was."

And he saw her smile, really smile, for the first time in ages. It was as brilliant as the stars glittering above them and he felt his heartbeat quicken, felt the blood stir in his veins.

Lisa looked at him and put a hand out toward him. She thought with sudden affection of the girl with the glossy brown hair and the good-looking young man, and she hoped their evening had worked out for them, too.

In a warm little bistro in a quiet London square, Joanna and Chris drank a toast to their magnificent Beethoven concert, and both knew that it was just the beginning of things to come. ❧

Prisoner Of The Keep

(Continued from page 27)

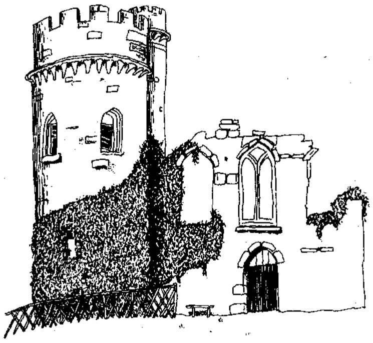
"Harlot!" she shouted, her face aflame with hatred. "No one will make a fool of me. I shall repay you!" Dangereuse, almost faint from the intense feeling in the woman's words, heard the heavy door slam as Philippa left the room.

She could feel no guilt or pity for William's overbearing wife. For while Philippa had given her husband a son to succeed him, she could never give him her love. Power-hungry and bitter over the loss of Toulouse—her father's lands—Philippa was incapable of anything but hatred and fighting. When Philippa had heard of Dangereuse's presence there she had run, eyes blazing, to her friends in court and then to the Church, begging for sympathy—and even for her own husband's excommunication. "Curls will grow on your pate before I shall part with the Viscountess," had been William's bold reply to the bishop.

But what could she do to pay back this hateful woman? Her desolation and loneliness had already put her into a weakened state, and Philippa's visit had added to her fear of isolation. Dangereuse sat, lost in a trance, searching frantically for an answer. She could no longer remain hidden, growing older day by day, wasting her youth and beauty, while an undeserving woman as Philippa stood by William's side.

Tears began to pour from her eyes. She arose and began to pace the room. In the distance she could faintly hear the sounds of the feast, the echoes of laughter. The reminder of the festivities and of all she was missing provoked her even further. Not fully conscious of what she was doing, she stumbled toward the door, and reached out to unbolt the lock. This door was the only thing separating her from the outside world—and from freedom. And if she were to open it and step outside into that forbidden world—for everyone to see—people would understand why William loved her and not the hateful Philippa who was wife in name only. *Yes, if they see me they will accept me.* In the next moment she drifted through the door, and when she heard her name spoken, she did not recognize the difference between reality and dream.

Dangereuse? Dangereuse!" William's urgent voice rang out. Dangereuse turned. Seeing the look of hurt and bewilderment that crossed the face of her lover, she instinctively reached out to him, as if to console him for something she was about to do. He caught her hand and pulled her to him.



"Where are you going?" he asked, unbelievingly. "You must never leave me, do you hear? I would find you, no matter where you go."

"William . . . William . . . my very own love," Dangereuse said as tears collected in her azure eyes. "How can I go on loving you so when you are not my husband? When I can only see you as a shadow, stealing in and out of my life? William! I cannot live knowing that I shall never be your rightful wife. To have to stay hidden, unable to stand beside you in front of others—" Dangereuse broke off, unable to go on.

William pulled her closer and stroked her hair the way he would a child's. He had decided what he would do.

"Dangereuse, you are everything to me. You are worth more to me than all my wealth and reputation. Tomorrow as I ride through my kingdom you shall be at my side, as Mistress of Acquitaine. Your portrait shall be on my shield, and your name shall forever be linked with mine. In the hearts of all those who have ever loved, you shall always be my true bride."

On the following day Dangereuse never looked lovelier as she sat on the proud ebony mare that carried her through the streets of Acquitane alongside William. She wore a brilliant blue gown and the string of tiny jewels braided into her hair glistened in the sunlight. The crowd gasped at her beauty and were envious of the Duke. As Dangereuse happily—and somewhat tearfully—looked up at the man she loved, she realized suddenly the strange irony of her presence beside him. For in reality it had been the evil Philippa and her rancorous visit to Dangereuse's chamber that had finally given Dangereuse the courage to turn the key and open the door that had set her free.

Editor's Note

For more than a decade after Dangereuse's famous first public appearance on the ebony mare, Philippa's animosity sputtered, as did that of her children. Finally, Philippa realized she could wreak no more vengeance on the two lovers whose union had weathered so many storms, and in resignation, she entered the church.

For generation after generation Acquitaine was ruled by Williams. The first was a childhood friend of the Emperor Charlemagne and by the time William IX became ruler in the eleventh century, Acquitaine enjoyed a peace and prosperity unknown in the rest of Europe. It was the most fertile province of Gaul.

William IX adored women, was the predecessor of the great troubadours and he made the pursuit of pleasure the central activity of his court. He first married Ermengarde, the daughter of the Count of Anjou. But the marriage ended with no heirs, and William then married Philippa, a curiously emancipated and cold woman who, although able to furnish him with children, could never return the passion he so desperately needed.

When he met Dangereuse in 1115, her beauty swept him off his feet and, ignoring the fact that wife-stealing was considered a crime, he carried her off to the keep he had built especially for her. Their deep love survived many years along with the ardent disapproval of Philippa and her children. William and Dangereuse would never become man and wife by law, but Dangereuse's daughter Aenor married William's eldest son and from that marriage came the heir to the kingdom and the renowned Queen, Eleanor of Acquitaine.

SEA CHANGE

(Continued from page 30)

overboard is. It's very hard to spot a head bobbing about in all that water, especially if there are waves. If ever you see someone fall overboard, do nothing at all but watch him. Keep your eye on him and your arm pointing to him and pay no attention to anything else. Let the helmsman follow where your arm points, and let the others get out ropes and life jackets."

Ellie must have listened. As John had looked away from Marion in her anguish, to see if maybe the ring was floating, he had seen Ellie positioned like a hunting dog at gaze, her eyes fixed on the little swirl of brown water and her arm pointing to its center. Without a word David had been over the side and down where Ellie pointed. It was only about fifteen feet deep. The water was clear. And wouldn't you know that ring had landed as pretty as you please on *top* of one of those rocks instead of in one of the cracks between them? That's what David told them when he brought it up. At least, after he'd finished coughing. He'd put the ring in his mouth for safekeeping as he swam to the surface and nearly swallowed it as they pulled him aboard. Another near miss. David was a grand young fellow in a pinch, but you couldn't fully count on him for details.

After that, what else could a man do but offer them the wedding present he knew that David, at least, wanted more than anything else in the world? Ellie might find that housekeeping on a boat was not the most comfortable way to spend a honeymoon, but that was David's problem, not John's. And *Cybèle* had looked beautiful sailing from the harbor.

The two of them had reached the club lounge by this time. John held Marion's chair as she sat down, just as he had done nearly every time she sat down for nearly twenty years. Young David would be careful. And at least Ellie had a good head on her shoulders. *Cybèle* would be all right.

"What will you have?" he said to Marion.

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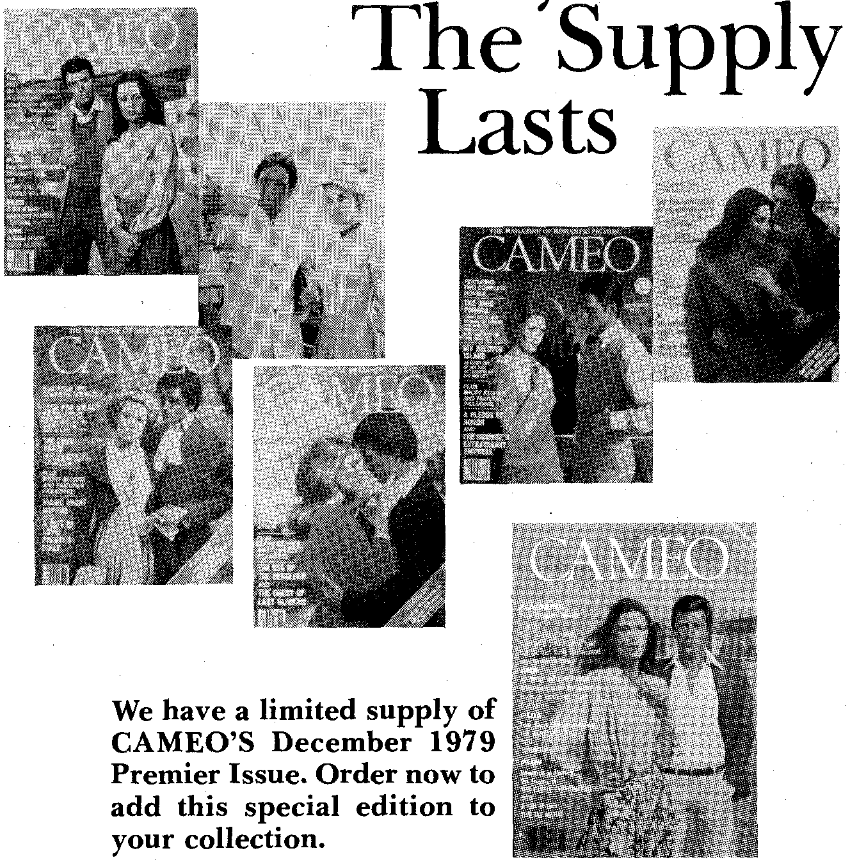

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Emma

A CAMEO NOVEL

(Continued from page 24)

become wet as the snow melted against the warmness of her flesh. But she collapsed again on the front steps. Once more we had to carry her indoors.

Nicholas brought Syriol into the library where a fire still burned, and laid her upon the settee. Mrs. Partington brought brandy. Hot bricks wrapped in flannel were prepared. Soon Syriol was resting in a dry dressing gown beneath a soft blanket. But she was like a corpse—all wish to live gone, bludgeoned by events.

"Angus. Why is there no news of Angus?" I heard Nicholas cry. I followed him into the hall just in time to see Baxter, with Hoskins the driver, enter the hall. Hoskins's uniform was stained and torn, his face white; he had a heavy gash down one side of his head. He was too overcome to speak at first and collapsed into a chair, weeping. Nicholas fetched a stiff dose of brandy and held it to the coachman's lips. Soon Hoskins was able to tell us what had occurred.

"Against the bend at the head of the valley there was a snowbank," he said. "We could not get through. I tried a detour into a field belonging to the Upland Fields. There was a gate hidden by the snow. The horses became entangled; one fell. Rosa, that was and she dragged Jason down with her. The rest of the horses panicked. Some part of the fence was broken . . . the spikes penetrated Jason's side. He seemed to go mad with pain. I sprang down from the driving box and did all I could to drag the horses clear, but they would not respond to the reins. I could not get nearer because of their thrashing hooves. I tried, but. . . . Then Mr. Angus got out of the coach and came to aid me.

"The horses, feeling the lightness of the coach, tried again to right themselves. But the coach fell over, the horses were dragged over also. I saw their hooves beating the air, while the snow . . . the snow made it impossible to see clearly what happened next. But Mr. Angus tried to reach the bridle of Rosa, a horse he had always cared for and that had always obeyed him. But he misjudged the situation. Rosa jerked her head away and Mr. Angus fell into the tangle of the horses' hooves. They kicked out in fear . . . I heard him cry in horror and desperation. And then. . . ."

But Hoskins could tell us no more. He was entirely overcome with grief and allowed Mrs. Partington to put her arm around his shoulder while she held to his nostrils her flask of smelling salts. He spluttered, but color came into his face and his back stiffened.

"Hoskins," said Nicholas, "could you take us to where the accident took place? If Mr. Angus is injured we must get him home at once. Baxter, get the brougham round. You and I will go and. . . . Emma, we have no doctor. Will you come? We must rely upon your medical knowledge now. Wrap up warmly. We may be gone for some time. And take a little wine to fortify you for the events ahead."

I thanked Nicholas for his thought, but did not take the wine, wanting a clear head to cope with coming events. Nicholas and I traveled together, sitting side by side in the brougham. It was what I had secretly dreamed of, this nearness. Yet the reality had the unreality of a dream.

We came at last to the scene of destruction and death. The great horse Jason was dead, impaled upon a spike from the broken fence. Rosa was wrestling to right herself, but was held down by the weight of the carriage and the twisted reins. Beneath these two horses there lay what appeared at first to be a mere blanket, crumpled and useless. And it was not until Baxter and Hoskins had attended to the horses that we were able to see what the blanket really was.

The three men turned over Angus's body. He had been kicked to death by the horses' hooves—by the animals, who, in their fright, did not know they were killing their master. Nicholas swiftly covered up the remains and refused to allow me near. "He is beyond your aid, Emma," he said firmly. "If he had been alive I would have wished you to attend him. But now . . . he is past everything. I cannot permit you even to see him. It would distress you too much."

I was greatly touched by Nicholas's solicitude for me, and his gesture of placing his arms around my shoulders. I did see, for one moment, as they lifted Angus's wrappped body into the brougham, a shattered red remnant of bone and flesh that once had been his head and face. Then this was covered, too. And thus he was, with Nicholas and myself to attend him, taken home.

Imperceptibly, Christmas Eve had turned into Christmas Day. It was the early hours of the morning when we stood in the library of Swanbrook Park.

"There is clearly going to be a great deal of legal business to attend to following Angus's death," Nicholas told the assembled group around Syriol's couch. She had wept bitterly when given the news of Angus's death.

"We did not even reach the ball," she cried, as if that somehow mattered greatly. "It happened on the way there." She sobbed again, but Nicholas was clearly anxious to continue to speak to us.

"I do not know anything about Angus's will, or even if he made one," Nicholas said. "But until this matter is cleared up, we must know and accept who is head of the Colville family. If Angus left no will, it is clear to me that in the natural progression of things Hugh inherits Swanbrook Park and the assets of the estate. And he is the legal head of the household from now on.

"But even if Angus has left a will there will be delay over the settling of legal matters during the Christmas holidays. Even if we later find that Angus has willed his vast estates elsewhere . . . for the moment we must accept that we cannot know who this person is.

"Therefore, in the place of the unknown legatee we must accept the younger brother of the deceased landowner. We must honor the natural progression of inheritance. Hugh must be acknowledged the family, and the possible sole owner of all the estates. Do you understand and do you agree?

"I propose that Emma and I go upstairs," Nicholas continued, "and tell Hugh of Angus's demise. And inform him that he is now head of the family—at least until Mr. Bardwell, the solicitor, can be contacted, to give us his guidance and advice."

Hugh was standing by the window in his dressing gown, his telescope trained upon the valley road. In spite of the snow and clouds, he would have seen what had happened at a distance. "So it was Angus," he said. "My elder brother." Tears fell from his eyes and we helped him into bed.

I had permission to give a soothing potion when necessary and this I now did. I saw Hugh slip into a deep sleep. Nicholas thanked me for my assistance and courteously withdrew. I could not myself sleep, but sat and then roamed about Hugh's bedroom, wondering and guessing at how this terrible accident would affect our lives.

The next morning, Hugh awoke early. I saw there was a brilliant flush upon his cheeks and his eyes were bright. "I do not for one moment believe that Angus left a will," he told me without preamble, when I took him his early morning chocolate. "I am the true heir. My father always promised me that. And now that Swanbrook Park and all its concerns have passed into my hands, Emma, a new chapter will open. We will do great things, you and I. We will restore the house to its former beauty and elegance. We will revive the trade overseas, we will re-let and work the farms.

"The farms, Emma," he cried. "All working. All prosperous. I can see the farmers and their families now, sowing and reaping, tending to their stock. It has grieved me beyond words to see their prosperity go." As he spoke, I looked from the window, at the desolate scene—tumbledown farmhouses, broken cottages, blown-over fences.

"I will trace those farmers, find out where they are, Emma, and bring them back. I will restore and revive the farms." He seized my hand. "I will provide money for repairs and renovations, for seed, for stock. I will do everything I can to bring the farmlands back to prosperity. And you must help me, Emma. You must write the letters and run the errands and see the men and bring them here. We will do it all from the turret room. . . ."

He began to cough, fighting for his breath, and blood ran from his mouth onto his kerchief. I calmed him and tried to get him to settle down. Throughout the whole of Christmas Day he talked with animation and conviction. A fiery red burned his cheeks, a penetrating light shone in his eyes. But toward evening he began to flag. He sank back on his pillows and bade me read to him. But even as I opened the page, he slipped into a doze.

Now a terrible foreboding filled me. The silence of the turret room was like the silence of a tomb. I held Hugh's hand in mine. It felt like paper, brittle and thin and lifeless. He has burnt himself out like a candle flame, I thought. It has been too much for him. I longed to jump to my feet, to race from the turret room to cry for help. The words, "Nicholas, Nicholas," formed themselves in my throat. I was deeply glad when, after the evening Christmas dinner, Nicholas found his way to the turret.

He sat on the other side of the bed and gazed at his cousin. Hugh did not look or speak to either of us. He opened his eyes after some time and spoke three words, "Remember the farms." He pressed my hand, raised it to his lips, and while in the fullness of this gesture, he passed away.

We had expected it for so long; we had been told so many times. Yet the reality of Hugh's passing hit both Nicholas and myself an almost mortal blow. We stayed together in the turret room with Hugh for what seemed a long time. We had not the heart to leave him, to seek any comfort other than that we continued to find by his side.

I cannot remember much of the next few days. The men took charge of everything. Hugh was buried beside Lady Adelaide in the churchyard of Deeping St. Paul. I remember Nicholas walked by my side, though he did not touch me. I felt if he had, I would have broken down.

After the funeral the house settled down—to wait to find out who, if anyone, was the heir to Swanbrook Park, its business interests and the estates. We would know on New Year's Day when Mr. Bardwell, the solicitor from Lincoln's Inn Fields, arrived.

Suddenly, as calm returned to the household, there grew a conviction in the minds of everyone living at Swanbrook Park that Nicholas would now inherit the estate.

"There can be no doubt as to the future," Cecile du Plessis told me, as we met on the stairs one day. The delicate features of her face were flushed; there was an unaccustomed brightness in her eyes. "I am told that Sir Frederick regarded Nicholas as his own son and thus made provision for his future, equal with Angus and Hugh. There can be no doubt, can there," she asked me, "that Nicholas, if the legal heir, will inherit?" Her voice faltered as she looked around and at the opulence of the hall below us.

I murmured politely in answer, and went on my way. She followed me. "You have been kind to me," she said. "In the future, when Nicholas inherits. . . ." She hesitated, as if appalled to find herself overstating her authority. "There will be some position for you here. You need not leave. I will take care of you. You can rely on that."

But I had stumbled up the stairs out of the way of her words, which though kindly meant, hurt me with their implication that my time at Swanbrook Park was almost over.

Was Cecile placing total reliance on securing Nicholas as her husband? Was she hoping to become mistress of Swanbrook Park? I told myself it was no business of mine as I toiled up the steps leading to the now deserted turret rooms. I had my own future to consider, and I knew I must soon begin to make my plans.

I visited Syriol several times to give her ease from her pain. She clearly regarded me as little better than an undermaid sent by cook. "We never arrived at the ball, Emma," she repeated to me endlessly. "If only I could have already become his wife," she continued in her disjointed way, obviously blaming the accident for her diminished status. "But I shall be there at the reading of the will," she said. "I shall fight for what is rightly mine."

Suddenly, she made up her mind. "Emma," she said, "I will tell you this. I have told no one. But I have decided that you should know. Dear Angus traveled into Wardcliffe to meet Mr. Bardwell by appointment, earlier on the day he died. He went to make a new will, in which, as his wife-to-be, I was to amply provided for. So you see, I shall no doubt be the principal beneficiary of the estate."

On New Year's Day, after Mr. Bardwell arrived, he sent word that he wished all members of the family and staff to assemble in the library at two o'clock. He asked that there be no absentees. I did not take this to include myself, as I was neither a member of the staff or family. I had occupied a unique position. I would pack, I told myself, and leave when the legal matters had been settled. It seemed churlish to leave before. I would sit in the turret room and wait until everything was over and Mr. Bardwell had gone.

I saw Mr. Bardwell and his clerk arrive from the windows of my eyrie and I began to check the contents of

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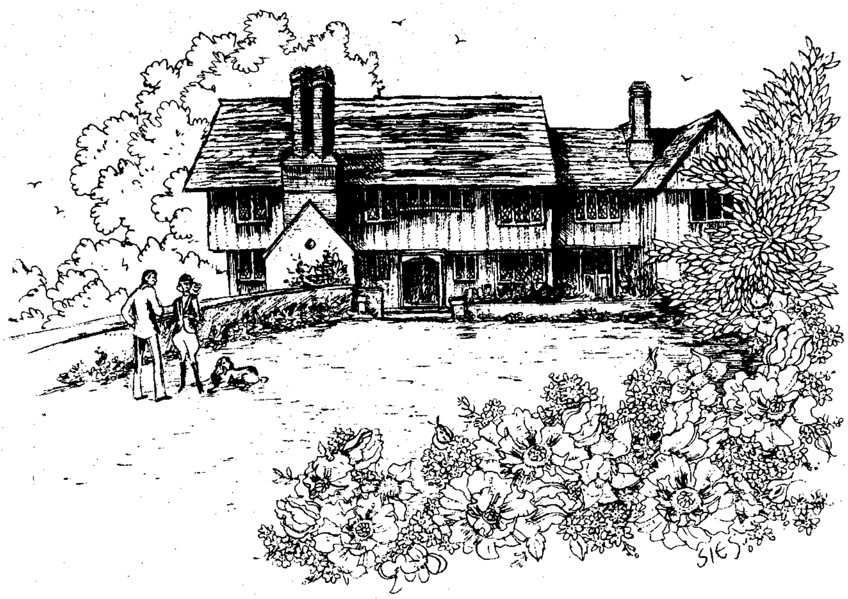
Whoso would not lose all his spirit, let him love!

Ovid
Amores



my suitcase. I thought it might even be possible to leave the Park that same day, when the legal business was completed. I began to smooth out my best dress when there was a knock at the door of the turret room and, upon my answering, a young man entered.

It was the clerk who had arrived with Mr. Bardwell. "Pray pardon me for interrupting you, Miss Emma," he began. "But my name is Mackiness and I am legal assistant to Mr. Bardwell. He has sent me to ask you to repair to the library without delay."

"I am sorry," I said, "I cannot see the need or necessity for this. I fear I should find it painful to hear legal matters concerning the two brothers I knew so well. And nothing that can be said can refer to me. Please ask Mr. Bardwell to excuse me. Though thank him for his kind invitation, all the same."

"Mr. Bardwell is aware of your feelings and your preparations for departure," Mr. Mackiness said. "But nevertheless, he wishes you to attend the meeting in the library. Indeed, he has informed me that he cannot begin until he sees you enter the room and take your place before him."

Mr. Mackiness escorted me downstairs, and I entered the library, an ancient room I had always loved. It was almost crowded. The entire household and outdoor staff were there. Nicholas sat in the center of the front row of chairs, flanked by Cecile and Syriol, the household staff immediately behind. A small chair had been placed for me, rather apart from the assembled throng.

Immediately, this segregation seemed to emphasize to me what had been my position at Swanbrook Park all my life—neither fish nor fowl, family nor staff. But as I had always accepted this position, I saw no reason to complain during my final hours in this ill-fated, though luxurious place.

Mr. Bardwell sat at a table before us, his clerk by his side. In measured tones Mr. Bardwell began to speak. Not an apron rustled; not a cough was heard.

"We face today a situation which is unusual in the extreme. We have not one, but two deaths to discuss. The repercussions of these unexpected and unusual circumstances must be wide. The first thing I have to tell the assembled company, which will clear our way for advancement, is that Mr. Angus Colville left no will. The estate therefore passed to his nearest living relative, who was. . . ."

But a voice interrupted Mr. Bardwell. "No will!" cried Syriol. "You say Angus left no will! But he assured me that he visited you on the morning of the day he died, purposely to make a substantial provision for me in his will."

Syriol rose to her feet; she wore an emerald green dress, and her emeralds and pearls. Her face had gone red, her eyes blazed with outrage and disbelief. "A figure was mentioned," she cried. "Angus told me that ten thousand pounds was to be mine upon our marriage. And later, a more substantial sum would be made over to me when our first son was born."

There was a gasp at this, the ripple of voices running around the library. Mr. Bardwell raised his hand. He said quietly, "It is true that Mr. Angus visited me while he was engaged in business at Wardcliffe. But this was upon a different matter entirely. No mention was made of any will. No bequests were suggested or discussed. Mr. Angus left no will, nor apparently, in my view, had he contemplated such."

"Is it hidden in the house?" Syriol cried. "Or your office? Did he make a will of which you know nothing? This can happen. He may have had second thoughts on the day of his death, and executed a will unbeknownst to you or anyone else."

"All my deposit boxes and this house have been thoroughly searched, as you well know, by two valued and experienced clerks," Mr. Bardwell replied. "No will executed by Angus Colville has been found. You may rest assured, Miss Claverley, that no will by Angus exists. If you accept this fact, please, it will make our task today the easier."

Syriol sat down. There was again a silence to hear Mr. Bardwell's next words.

"And now I must commend Mr. Nicholas Wetherby. For, Mr. Wetherby, you acted entirely correctly in assuming that Mr. Hugh was head of the family and the lawful legatee. Because Mr. Angus left no will, the estate of Swanbrook Park did indeed pass in its entirety into the hands of Mr. Hugh. It was his tragedy that his health did not permit him to enjoy what was rightfully his."

Mr. Bardwell now opened his leather case and drew a file out of it. From it he took a document. We could see the thin but firm legal script and seals on the parchment. He began to turn the pages.

"This will," Mr. Bardwell began, "is dated two years ago. It was executed on December the twelfth, 1840. Mr. Hugh Colville did not expect to have so great a fortune at his disposal when he first made this will. But I have no doubt that even had he known of his inheritance, the disposition of it, by his wish, would have been the same."

There was now an intense silence in the room. A coal fell from the big fire; the French ormolu clock ticked on. Mr. Bardwell began to read. "These are Mr. Hugh's words as dictated to me," he began.

"I *cannot* bequeath my worldly goods to the one who cared for me through so many years of my life, giving her strength to me and infusing me with her will to live. Pouring out her energies that I might survive. Without Clemency's care I would have died in the sanatorium, years ago. Only her skill gave me respite. And it is only her devotion to me in the turret rooms which has granted me some personal happiness in spite of my disabilities, and the circumstances of my life.

"But as Clemency would have wished, and as I wish also, I hereby bequeath all my worldly possessions to my dearly beloved daughter, called Emma Hannah Masters, but who is in reality Emma Hannah Masters Colville.

"I trust that this bequest may be a token to her of our love for her. And some consolation for the fact that during the lifetime of her parents we gave her only an assumed name, and did not grant her her legal name nor acknowledge her status in our lives."

Consternation reigned in the room. Into my astonished ears the sounds penetrated like waves upon a seashore, like a high wind blowing up into a gale. I gripped the arms of my chair. With amazed eyes I could only stare at Mr. Bardwell's face.

But someone was on her feet. Syriol waved her arms and turned to address the gathering. "An illegitimate child," she cried. "An illegitimate child is going to inherit Swanbrook Park and its wealth.

"Where is the justice in that? I could be called Angus's common-law wife. Had not the accident halted us, I would have been engaged to Angus with all the status that implied. Then he would have made a will—I am sure he would have made a will. And in my favor. Make no mistake of that. I cannot bear it that this illegitimate child should supplant me in what I regard as rightfully mine." She began to cry.

Mr. Bardwell did not move from his chair. "Pray calm yourself, madam," he said sternly. "And guard your words or you may find yourself in deeper trouble than you expect.

"Miss Emma is not illegitimate," he told us all. "I hold her birth certificate in my hands. Also the marriage certificate of her parents, Hugh Guy Colville and Clemency Dawe. Their marriage was solemnized in Dover almost nineteen years ago. These documents have been carefully checked with parish registers by my two trusted clerks. They are quite valid. There is no mistake. Miss Emma is the lawful daughter of the late Clemency Colville and of the late Hugh Guy Colville.

"In the late Mr. Hugh's will," Mr. Bardwell continued, "there are individual bequests to each and every worker in the house and upon the estate. But after these bequests have been paid Miss Emma stands as the lawful legatee of her father, and thus inherits Swanbrook Park and the entire estate."

I found I had risen to my feet, although the power of my senses seemed to have left me. I felt lost in time and space, in a situation I could scarcely understand. Then through the haze of the sea of faces I saw Mr. Bardwell had risen from his place at the table and had crossed the room to be by my side.

He smiled at me, and in the lighting of his dour face I found the reassurance I was seeking. He took my right hand in his own and raised my hand a little, as if presenting me in formal introduction.

"I trust you will grant to the new mistress of Swanbrook Park your full loyalty and service," he said. "Which is due to her through her position and through the merits of her own nature."

I knew I must regain my senses and behave in a fitting way. I held onto Mr. Bardwell's hand. Through the blur of my returning senses I saw that there was movement now; heard voices, cries, smothered exclamations. Then, slowly, four people approached Mr. Bardwell and myself. Mrs. Partington, Simons, Baxter the groom and Hoskins the coachman stopped in front of us.

"If I may speak for all," Mrs. Partington began, "both indoor and outdoor staff would like to present their compliments to you, Miss Emma. And request that we may remain in your service, as we have been in the service of the members of the family before you."

"But of course, Mrs. Partington," I replied. I smiled at all four, feeling quite overcome. "I shall rely upon your services in the future. I shall always value your efforts, as I have valued your assistance to me in days past." They seemed reassured by my comments. Mr. Bardwell tightened his grip upon my arm.

"You can scarcely expect me to congratulate you," Syriol said. She swayed a little and her face was still crimson. The intensity of her emotions had caused the bruise to burgeon on her cheek; the scratches on her skin were inflamed and open. "I expect you will want me to leave here without delay," she said ungraciously. "I can hardly wait to quit myself of this place."

She looked in no fit state to travel, or even to be upon her feet.

"There is no need to hasten away," I assured her. "Please remain at Swanbrook Park until your injuries are healed and your health is recovered."

She looked at me with surprise, then mumbled unintelligibly. Cecile came to her side to help her away. As the room began to clear of the staff, one other person approached me. I waited it seemed through an aeon of time for Nicholas to reach my side. I had not seen him alone since the evening of Hugh's death.

So intense had been my own reactions to the overwhelmingly startling events, that I had quite overlooked the effect these must have had upon Nicholas. One look at his face told me that he was deeply affected.

He was deathly pale and he had lost that becoming, teasing flush which heightened his cheekbones and the nobility of his forehead. His gray eyes had become dark, almost violet. His stance was upright and he seemed to be making an intense effort to put a good face upon a grievous situation.

"You are disappointed . . ." I began, and my heart cried out that I was the cause of his disappointment. I could have almost told him to take the estate and my inheritance. It did not matter to me. He could have it. I would not wish to cause for one instant a shadow upon his face.

But Mr. Bardwell had again taken my arm, gripping it tightly. It was as if he knew what was on the tip of my tongue, and he wished to warn me to be on guard. He did not want me to make, at this moment, an emotional or unguarded comment or a promise I might not be able to keep in the future. My words faltered on my lips and I regarded the man I loved without saying a single word.

Nicholas pulled himself together with an effort. "I have come to congratulate you," he said. "Disappointed? Yes. I am disappointed. But that must surely be a natural reaction, since the true circumstances of your position were not known or guessed at. I trust my natural disappointment will not at any time be held against me."

I was about to reassure him, but again Mr. Bardwell restrained me. "Please know my support is yours," Nicholas said. "And my regard, at all times in the future." And he took my free hand in his, raising it to his lips.

By this time the room was almost empty. "Mrs. Partington informs me that family dinner will be at seven o'clock," Mr. Bardwell said good-humoredly. He had relaxed his grip upon my arm, believing the worst dangers for me must be over.

"I trust that you and Mr. Mackiness will remain?" I asked Mr. Bardwell.

He assented gravely, then added, "I will leave you to go to your room."

I went up the three flights of stairs to the turret room. To my surprise I found the room tidy but bare. My cases, clothes and possessions had entirely disappeared. I turned in consternation to see Ethel at the door. "Miss Emma," she said, "Mr. Bardwell said to conduct you to . . . to your new room. I have taken your things. This way, Miss, please."'

I followed Ethel down the stairs and she led me along the main corridor to the room that stood at the head of the staircase. She opened the double doors and motioned to me to enter. I followed her inside.

I knew that this was the master bedroom of the house, the room of Sir Frederick and Lady Adelaide during their lifetimes. I had never been inside this room, though I had glimpsed it from the open doorway. I stood in the center of the floor now and looked around me.

I do not know by what sleight of hand Mrs. Partington and Ethel had laid and lit a fire in the big, white marble grate. White lamps glowed; candles had been lit. A vase full of evergreen had been placed on a low table. On the bedside chest stood a small spirit lamp and a tiny silver kettle. Biscuits were in a silver dish placed upon a needlework cover.

The room seemed to me immense. It was carpeted in a rich but faded Aubusson; the furniture was French Empire, painted white and touched with gilt. There was a big four-poster bed draped with French muslin and covered with a silk quilt. There were pictures, ornaments, embroidered hangings. A deep comfort eased the body and the mind.

"I trust all is to your liking, Miss Emma," said Ethel, "and that I may become your personal maid."

"I shall not require a personal maid, Ethel," I told her. "But please continue your duties as before."

I smiled at her as she left, for I valued her presence and help. Ethel and Mrs. Partington were now like landmarks and towers of strength in a shifting storm.

I washed in the hot water already in the bowl, and went to the wardrobe to inspect my clothes. Ethel had hung my meager wardrobe and I took down my one and only best dress. It was of light blue crepe with a white overbodice and darker blue flounce. I brushed my auburn hair and secured it in place with a white bandeau. I wore my only piece of jewelry, a single gold chain.

At seven o'clock there was a knock at the door and Mr. Mackiness stood outside. He courteously escorted me down the stairs. In the big hall Mr. Bardwell awaited, and upon his arm I entered the dining room of Swanbrook Park.

I had never before attended a meal in this room. Now, with its chandeliers glowing, its rosewood furniture reflecting the light, the china and silver gleaming, its beauty took my breath away. I tried to smile at those who stood around the table while my heart beat like a wave upon a shore. Mr. Bardwell took me to the head of the table and I seated myself there. I nodded, indicating that the others should also be seated.

I saw that Nicholas had taken his place at the opposite end of the table from myself. Simons and Ethel carried in a goose on a huge silver platter, decked with oranges, parsnips and other vegetables. Nicholas rose to his feet. His eyes were upon mine. Again I nodded and he took up the silver carvers. With great attention, he began to carve the goose, laying the slices on the plates before him.

When he had finished, he filled his glass with wine and raised his glass toward me. He was smiling and his eyes sought and held my own. I did not respond to his toast, I was too shy and uncertain of myself. But his regard, his obvious approval and acceptance filled me with a new warmth and certainty. And my love for him filled my empty, aching heart.

The next morning Mr. Bardwell proposed that we take a drive around the estate. He ordered his own carriage and Mr. Mackiness acted as coachman. I knew then that he wished to speak with me in privacy, wthout the opportunity for others to listen in.

We set off up the valley road toward the distant horizon. Mr. Bardwell told me the details of my inheritance and said that he and Mr. Mackiness were totally at my service.

The carriage progressed along the valley road. Truth to tell, I had never been so far as we had traveled now. At the top of the rise the carriage halted and I looked about me. I was astonished at what I saw. Adjoining the farmlands of Swanbrook Park were other farms, other enterprises, other dwellings. And that these were well attended, profitable and in good order, was clear to even the inexperienced eye.

"These are the lands of your neighbor, Squire Pollock," Mr. Bardwell told me. "He is an experienced farmer and a man of affairs. It is a pity your own lands were not developed upon his plan."

I did not speak, although I thoroughly agreed. In the distance we could see a far-off pall of smoke, black and heavy, staining the pearl-like sky.

"That is the industrial town of Wardcliffe," Mr. Bardwell said. "There are cotton mills there, a great deal of commerce, many hands are employed."

Suddenly I could bear no more. The front I had put up since the reading of the will yesterday, and the revelation of my birth, cracked and broke open. Tears poured down my face. I clasped my hands before me. "Why did they do it, Mr. Bardwell?" I cried. "Why did they not tell me I was their daughter? Why did they bring me up to believe. . . ." Words failed me.

"It was Clemency's decision entirely," he answered. "Mr. Hugh always wanted you to be told the truth. He longed to acknowledge you as his daughter. But Clemency was adamant. The way of life she had planned for the three of you was the only way of life she would allow you to live."

"But why, Mr. Bardwell? Why? That is what I cannot understand."

"You must understand Clemency's nature," he began. "She was serious in her opinions. She did not approve of the life Lady Adelaide encouraged at Swanbrook Park. She did not approve of the balls, dances, parties, hunting. She thought these things wicked. They

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The Trembling Flame

by Laurence E. Estes

Oh, may the flame of your desire
Be not likened to an even fire—
That will tremble, that will doubt,
That will lessen and go out.

seemed a menace to her. She thought that if she revealed her marriage to Hugh, she and you, as well, would be drawn into the mainstream of such a life at the Park. It was against her nature and something she could not accept.

"She also told me in confidence that if she became Mrs. Hugh Colville, she feared she would lose the love of Hugh. For she was . . . self-deprecating. She could not believe in her own attraction. She thought that with Hugh thrown frequently into the company of other women, his love for her would be lost. And his love was the dominant thing in her life. She loved with an intensity and compulsive possession, to the end.

"In vain I told her there could surely be no possibility of any threat to her marriage. Hugh was too sick a man to seek other distractions. But she could not risk that possibility. She chose instead to live in the turret rooms, unacknowledged and unaccepted. She sought to preserve her love by these means. And Mr. Hugh understood and accepted what she wished—from his own great devotion and caring for her.

"Her one regret, was for yourself. Not that you were missing the social life that Lady Adelaide adored. No. But that you did not enjoy the status your true name bestowed upon you. But she thought once you knew the secret of your birth she would lose your love and affection, too.

"Do not judge Clemency harshly," Mr. Bardwell continued. "She conducted her hidden life with a minimum of falsehood. The death of her sister was the truth in all details. The only departure from the truth was that the baby born was Clemency's and not her sister's.

"This falsehood troubled her greatly, and I know she sought forgiveness for it in her prayers. That God forgave her I have no doubt," Mr. Bardwell concluded somberly. "For no one lived a life of greater service than your mother. You can in truth both love and honor, for all time, her name."

This was my own conclusion. I loved my vanished parents, although I longed still, and would always long to have acknowledged them by name. I began to dry my eyes and we continued on our way.

"You are now a wealthy young woman," Mr. Bardwell said, as the carriage followed the rutted tracks of the valley road. "You can afford to buy what you wish, to visit London, entertain your friends, travel abroad. Why not a journey to Paris, to Switzerland, to Venice?"

I knew that he meant I should in due course begin to consider receiving court from a prospective husband. But I could not tell him that love had long ago come to me, and no man in the future could occupy the place that was already given in my life.

It was at this moment that we saw, riding across the fields of Squire Pollock's land, a solitary horseman astride a large, rangy black horse. It was clear the rider was having trouble controlling the powerful animal, although the horse was sure-footed in the snow. It was as if man and mount were well-matched—each powerful, energetic and passionately determined.

I saw black hair curling around a well-shaped head; a face ruddy from the open air. Dark eyes regarded us, a competent hand held aloft his riding crop in greeting.

"Mark Drummond," said Mr. Bardwell, as he bowed his head to acknowledge the salute. With a powerful thrust of its hindquarters, the wilful animal bore the rider away.

Mr. Bardwell did not elaborate and I did not ask any questions. But in a strange way, the sight of this unknown and powerful rider brought to life within myself a new strength, a new resolution, a new purpose in my life. I seemed to remember Hugh's last words: his concern for the farms; his longing to see them prosper again.

"Thank you for your advice, Mr. Bardwell," I said. "But I have no wish to travel abroad. I intend to take over control of the estates of Swanbrook Park, the business interests abroad, and the farms, and conduct them as a business proposition. I intend to take my place in every way as the mistress of Swanbrook Park."

When Nicholas heard of my intention he was first amused, then incredulous. "You take over the running of Swanbrook Park and its estates! Are you serious, Emma? You have no training; you have shown no inclination for such matters. It is scarcely seemly for a woman to be engaged in business affairs.

"Do not worry your pretty head over the running of Swanbrook Park," he instructed me. "Crompton and I will see to everything as we have been since Angus died. This inheritance is your great opportunity, my dear. You can blossom out into social life. You can enjoy yourself, buy clothes, give parties. Leave Crompton and myself to engage in commerce. We will do everything for your benefit, Emma. And on your behalf."

This conversation took place in the drawing room just before the departure of Mr. Bardwell and Mr. Mackiness.

"Miss Emma has made her decision, Mr. Wetherby," Mr. Bardwell told Nicholas dryly. "I think it will take greater powers of persuasion than you or I possess to change her from it."

I escorted the two legal men to the door. Mr. Bardwell promised to return immediately, should I need him. His unspoken support gave me strength to face the future. I returned to the drawing room to continue my talk with Nicholas. While I had been absent, he had clearly tried to come to some sort of terms with the news of my decision. He began to speak to me in a different tone.

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am to have you downstairs in our midst. I often regretted that it was necessary for you to bury yourself upstairs, in the turret rooms." He took my hand in his, his gray eyes regarding me intently. He smiled and all the hidden warmth of his nature showed upon his face.

I flushed in spite of myself. The love I bore within me, which I carried everywhere like a secret garland, grew and filled the empty places of my heart. Nicholas placed his arm within mine and began to lead me toward the library, where I knew it was his habit to take a glass of sherry at this time in the morning. I halted his footsteps.

"Since I am quite serious in my wish to take charge of the affairs of the Park," I told him, "I should like to begin without delay. Will you please take me to the study, so that I may speak with Crompton and inspect the documents and the books."

A look of consternation and sudden fury dyed Nicholas's face a deep scarlet. He withdrew his arm from mine and turning, conducted me toward the study. This chamber was entirely utilitarian, and contained the ledgers and records of the business interests of the Colville family. Its one regular custodian was Crompton, the slightly lame clerk.

As I entered, Crompton looked at me with surprise and rose to his feet. A greeting faltered on his lips, but glancing at Nicholas he uttered no word. I saw his hands tremble slightly as he laid down his quill pen.

Crompton was tall and dark; his face was pale but he had surprisingly fine eyes beneath level black brows. His disability was clearly a great handicap. One leg was shorter than the other and when he walked his gait was ungainly. He was an orphan and lodged in the village of Deeping St. Paul.

Althought I had known of Crompton's existence, we had scarcely spoken to one another beyond a formal greeting. "Good morning, Crompton," I said now. Suddenly I wanted the friendship of this crippled and lonely young man. "Perhaps you will have heard of my decision to take over the conduct of affairs in the study. I trust you will serve me as you have served my predecessors. Please sit down. I wish information only, today. I am concerned about the general state of the farms that belong to Swanbrook Park."

There was a chair behind the main desk and in this I seated myself. I had the impression this chair had not been used for some time. I saw Crompton's doubtful regard and felt the disapproval of Nicholas who continued to stand nearby. A wave of terror and dismay swept over me.

I felt suddenly that I was making a fool of myself. I had undertaken more than I could perform. I dreaded making any obvious errors and receiving the scorn or veiled ridicule of the experienced men who faced me now in the study. As if Nicholas sensed my misgivings, his gaze turned sardonic. I forced myself to continue to regard Crompton with steady eyes.

"What do you wish to know, Miss Emma?"Crompton asked.

"What has happened to the farmers who used to live and work as tenants in the Swanbrook Park farm?"

Relief showed upon Crompton's face. "All four men are now working in the mills at Wardcliffe," he replied. "Two are in the mill of Mr. Bevis Levett, and the others in the mill owned by Mr. Mark Drummond."

A fleeting image of the man on the wild black horse sprang into my mind. Again, I felt a new resolve; I felt emboldened to go on. "Do you consider these men capable of resuming work on the farms?" I asked Crompton.

"But certainly," Crompton replied, almost eagerly, I thought. "All are in good health and greatly miss the outdoor life. I spoke with them only recently and they assured me. . . ." His voice died away as he met Nicholas's eyes.

"Then please inform these men that I wish to see them," I told Crompton. "Please arrange appointments with them for me. I wish to open up the farms again, as working propositions, without delay."

"And how do you propose to pay for this expenditure upon the farms?" Nicholas asked.

"Mr. Bardwell informed me that drafts from abroad are due in shortly," I said.

"You are remarkably well-informed, Emma," Nicholas said dryly. At this implied criticism a deep hurt filled my spirit. Words of abandoning my plan formed on my lips.

But Crompton intervened. "That is true," Crompton said. "And when the drafts arrive it will be your duty, Miss Emma, as head of the estate, to endorse the drafts before I take them to the bank."

"That is enough, Crompton," said Nicholas. "You are overstepping the bounds of duty. I will instruct Miss Emma what to do when the time arrives."

"In the meantime," I told Crompton with a smile, "I should like to see the bank books of the estate, to learn what the Park's resources are at the present time."

"I am sorry about this," said Nicholas swiftly, "but the books are at the bank for audit. I do not know when they will be returned. The bank always takes its time."

"I will inform you when the books arrive," Crompton put in. He seemed unable to keep his pleasure at my presence from his face.

I rose and thanked Crompton for his cooperation. I thought I had gone far enough for one day. Nicholas escorted me from the study. We walked together toward the library, and once there he poured two glasses of sherry.

"Please do not misunderstand my reactions, Emma," he said as he raised the amber glass toward me. "You have taken me by surprise. You are full of contradictions, my dear."

I turned gratefully to the new friendliness in his face. I could not bear his disapproval or the withdrawing of his good will.

"I shall regard your interest in the farms as a passing phase, Emma," he told me. "You are like a child with a new toy. Business life will soon pall, my dear. Particularly when there is no need for your concern. You will soon see that your affairs are in good hands."

I did not answer, for I did not wish to spoil the new and pleasant mood between us. "By the way," Nicholas continued, "I have been land-agent of these estates for several years now. I assisted Angus with the running of all business matters, and did so during Hugh's brief tenure.

"I trust I may continue in this office, now that you have inherited, dear Emma," Nicholas said. "I would not wish to leave Swanbrook Park, nor would I wish to leave you without guidance at so vital a time in your young life."

"But, of course, Nicholas," I said. "You must remain." Nicholas's departure was unthinkable. "I shall rely upon you to continue as before. That is understood between us. There should never be any doubt."

I did not know that Nicholas had been land-agent at Swanbrook Park. But how could I have known that? Business matters before this time had been no concern of mine. And I could not bear the thought that Nicholas might leave this house.

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Oh love! How perfect is thy mystic art,
Strengthening the weak and trampling
on the strong.

George Gordon, Lord Byron
Don Juan

At the end of the gathering in the library, when Mr. Bardwell had revealed my inheritance, Cecile du Plessis had come to me in some consternation, and I saw that her small, pretty lips were downcast. "Will you expect me to leave the Park?" she asked.

"Surely not," I answered. "Please stay as Nicholas's guest for the time of the holiday that was previously arranged."

I saw her look of relief and gratitude. A feeling of pity and sorrow for her filled my heart.

During these days business matters were never mentioned between Nicholas and myself. We saw much of one another, for I loved roaming about the big house, admiring its rooms and decorations, the broad vistas from the windows.

Nicholas knew my joy in having the freedom of the house and he often came with me.

It was inevitable that this new friendship should be remarked by others in the house. I saw at once that

Cecile was disappointed and felt neglected. I was in the conservatory looking out at the still snowbound lands around us, when I heard Cecile's voice.

". . . I know she is fascinating and beautiful, your cousin Emma," she was saying. "It was natural that she should blossom from a quiet mouse to a young lady of charm and vitality. But I feel hurt by your neglect. I have hardly seen you for two days. Have my own charms waned so exceedingly? Has my company palled, our friendship become so tiresome or unacceptable to you?"

"You must know that nothing was promised between us, Cecile," I heard Nicholas reply. "Our acquaintance was brief indeed. Surely it is natural that I should pay attention to the new owner of the estate? And as you say, she is turning into a person of interest and charm. I enjoy her company. It is a great asset to have a young woman of beauty and intelligence as a member of the family, and living within the house. . . ."

Their voices died away, then I heard Cecile say, "I have an invitation for the first of February, in Chester, but until then, Nicholas, I have nowhere to go.

"Only a fortnight," she went on. "If you could extend your invitation. . . ." Then their voices were heard no more and I knew they had moved away.

Shortly afterward, Nicholas came to me with a new proposition. "A dinner party," he began. "We must have a social gathering to introduce you to my friends. You will be a great success, Emma. Do not be afraid. This will launch you upon the social scene. We will present you to the families of the county; it will be your first entrance into the social life of the region."

My heart sank. But Nicholas's gaiety and kindliness gave me new strength. A date was set for the dinner party to be held a week from that day.

Then I began to see that the furnishings of the Park were not in the first flush of youth; indeed, had been past their prime for a considerable time. The gilt on the chairs was tarnished; upholstery was scuffed; curtains faded and worn.

"How shabby things have become, Cecile," I said, as our French guest accompanied me around the rooms.

"No money has been spent on the house for a long time," Cecile said thoughtfully. "But all is not lost. We can effect a great improvement before the party. Those curtains can be turned. The carpets brushed with camomile tea. The chandeliers cleaned with powdered chalk. The drapes from the grand piano will make cushions to hide much of the upholstery's wear.

"If you will allow me to have an underhousemaid for three days, I can make these improvements. And also, I found this length of satin-striped brocade in a chest in my bedroom. See, it is a beautiful pearl gray. If you wish, I can make you a dress for the dinner party. I have been trained in such needlework. and believe me, you will be no trouble at all to fit."

I was amazed and touched by Cecile's efforts, and I remembered her conversation with Nicholas. "Please continue to stay at the Park as my guest," I told her, trying to make my voice as easy and natural as possible. "Stay till the beginning of February, Cecile. You are a great help to me and it is pleasant to have you here."

This was indeed the truth, for I was finding in the apparently shallow young socialite a kindliness and depth I had not expected. She went to work with a will, restoring the downstairs rooms of the Park. And she cut, pinned and basted upon me a dress styled from the remnant of brocade.

On the night of the dinner party I stood in my room and looked at the finished result. Cecile had fashioned the dress into a sculptured staff, upon which she had draped a deep flounce. She had insisted the bodice be cut very low. But around my shoulders she had drawn deep layers of ruching, which formed small sleeves and saved the modesty of the dress. Yet even so . . . as a I surveyed myself in the mirror I felt overwhelmed by the picture I presented. She had bound back my auburn hair with a silver ribbon taken from her own collection.

As I stood with the firelight filling the room, and the white globes of the lamps glowing softly, there was a knock at my door and Nicholas asked to speak with me. "I have brought you this," he said, entering. He held in his hand a chain of silver, bearing a locket at the end. I was overwhelmed. I took the beautiful piece of jewelry, and held it in my hand.

"Cecile told me your dress was of silver-gray," Nicholas said, "and I thought this would add the finishing touch. Wear it, please. May I place it upon you?" He turned me around, drew the delicate, shimmering chain across my bosom and fastened the clasp around my neck.

I turned back to face him. The look on his face arrested me, halting my words and thoughts, my desires and my intentions.

He drew me into his arms and kissed me gently. As he released me there seemed to be a new commitment in his face, a new tenderness. I began to tremble. It was as if his new feelings matched my own.

To hide my embarrassment, I bent my head and opened the locket. Inside, there was the miniature portrait of a woman. She had Nicholas's thick flaxen hair, his eyes oddly ringed with brown, his mouth which could be both serious and tender.

There was, also, over her face an expression of remoteness, of withdrawal. Even in the tiny picture she gave a strong impression of being in a world of her own. "My mother," Nicholas said. "She died a few years ago. In a sanatorium," he added, with sadness in his voice. I felt deeply touched that he had given me a token of his past, one which clearly meant a great deal to him.

He drew me into his arms again and this time his kiss was deeper, more serious, more intense. I trembled and would have fallen had not his strong hands held me.

And thus, upon his arm, I descended the stairs to take my place at the dinner party. Already the guests were assembling in the hall, and Simons was attending the new arrivals with crystal goblets of sherry upon his silver tray.

I do not remember a great deal about this dinner party. I know there were six men guests invited, all Nicholas's friends. They were mostly millowners from Wardcliffe, although one was a local landowner and another a corn merchant. No ladies accompanied these gentlemen, or had been included in the invitation.

"Bevis Levett," Nicholas said, presenting his chief friend to me. I saw a man in early middle age; competent and far-seeing. His face was mottled with tiny red veins; his eyes were friendly but shrewd. He had thick chestnut brown hair that added greatly to his attractiveness. I imagined he would have great appeal for women.

Syriol had come downstairs for the party, wearing a dress of deep puce

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There is no sorrow like a love denied
Nor any joy like love that has its will.

Richard Hovey
The Marriage of Guenevere

trimmed with olive green. She had skillfully camouflaged her bruises with salves and powders. Her hair was in ringlets, framing her beautiful shoulders. She extended her arms wide, with her usual gesture, when she entered the dining room, as if to encompass all the men there. Her eyes regarded each in turn. I guessed she was seeking an opportunity to restore her fortunes.

Soon we were all seated. I took my place at the head of the table; Nicholas occupied the other end. Soups and wines were served, cutlets, veal in breadcrumbs.

When the confections and fruits had been removed, Nicholas raised his glass in my direction. "Gentlemen, may I ask you to drink a toast to the new owner of Swanbrook Park, Miss Emma Masters Colville. Miss Emma, we drink to your health and happiness, and long may you be the chatelaine of Swanbrook Park."

I flushed, unprepared for this salute. The men stood in their places and raised their glasses. In spite of myself I felt overcome by the occasion. I made a brief reply and asked the gentlemen to toast the other two ladies present. This was done with much courtly banter, which Cecile and Syriol enjoyed. I felt the evening was a great success.

After the toasts the conversation at the table grew more general in tone: ". . . . he is a menace to us all," I heard Mr. Dalkieth, a millowner tell Nicholas. "His new ideas will ruin him and us together. He is a barbarian and a dangerous man. Mark Drummond," he spat out the name. "He is a blight upon Wardcliffe and brings us all into disrepute."

"His ideas are dangerous," David Wilkins, another millowner said. "Twelve hours a day is the accepted rate of work for both men and women. Drummond has lowered this to ten at his Ludorum Mill. And he refuses to employ children. Tell me, how can he spin cotton without children to crawl beneath the machinery to tie the ends? Tell me that."

"He says his output will be the same, even with the lowered working day," another voice added. "It is this aspect of the matter that concerns me. If he should succeed, if other work people hear of this, it will mean trouble."

I was deeply interested in the exchange. I plucked up my courage and ventured to ask, "But are the hours of work the only matters for disapproval, concerning Mr. Drummond?"

There was silence as the men turned their heads toward me. I gathered it was unusual for a woman to ask questions that ventured into men's concerns.

"Do not worry your head about Mr. Drummond," Mr. Wilkins said. "He is not likely to stray into your path, Miss Emma. He would not meet with your approval in any way."

"He is a loner," said another. "Prefers riding that damn great black horse of his across Squire Pollock's lands, to. . . ."

"Yes, sir, to what?" I asked.

"To joining in civilized pursuits, my dear," Bevis Levett intervened.

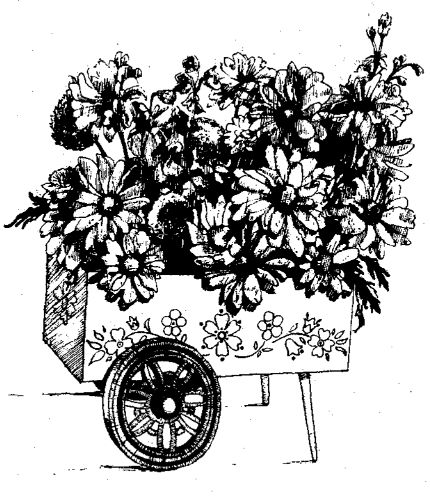
"He does not play cards with us," Nicholas added cheerily. "He scorns our company. He does not drink with us, or join our excursions to London, to. . . ." Warning glances told Nicholas not to go further. "He pursues his own course. But that course may bring ruin upon himself—and the repercussions may affect everyone here."

Upon this note Nicholas nodded to me, and the ladies rose from the table with me and repaired to the drawing room. After their port the men joined us briefly for coffee. But they were in no mood for further conversation, anxious to be off on other pursuits.

"We shall not see them again this evening," Syriol said, when the drawing room door closed behind them. "The serious business of their evening will now begin. Cards," she said. "Gaming for high stakes. Angus was after women," she added, "but Nicholas is a compulsive gambler."

I was astonished by her outspokenness, and her perception. And I knew in my heart that her words were true.

Shortly after this I crossed the hall on my way to my room. I saw that a huge fire burned in the library, that a table had been set up covered with green baize. There were dice, horn shakers, unopened packs of cards. Simons was there, presiding over a side table on which stood a vast array of wines and spirits. The men did not hear me, and someone closed, with finality, the double door.



The ladies spent a quiet evening with little further conversation, and we all went to bed early. The excitement had gone out of the evening for us; we were each occupied with our own thoughts.

I do not know what it was that awoke me from sleep. The night was dark and still. I slipped out of bed and drew on my dressing gown. I went to the door, opened it and quietly stepped outside.

The chandelier was still burning in the hall. There was light from the now-dying fire in the library. But the guests had gone. Two men were standing in the hall: Nicholas and Bevis Levett. Levett was speaking. I was standing barefoot on the upper landing and could hear his voice clearly.

"Twenty-seven thousand pounds is the amount you owe me. You promised it to me when Angus was alive. Now Angus is dead, and someone else instead of yourself has inherited the estate. Still you owe me the same amount. I want this money now. You must clear your obligation to me without delay. Or. . . ."

"But surely you cannot press me without giving me an opportunity to recoup," Nicholas replied. "You yourself know I have had a long run of bad luck. But this cannot last forever. Soon the cards will fall my way."

"Be that as it may," Bevis said. "Your debt remains outstanding and I must have the money. See to it, Nicholas. This is my final word. Otherwise. . . ."

The two men continued to talk but their words were muted as they moved toward the front door. I drew back into the shadows as the door opened and Bevis Levett took his leave. Nicholas returned alone to the library, closing the door behind him. I guessed that Nicholas would not go to bed that night.

I passed a sleepless night and the next morning decided I must talk with Nicholas, though I did not know what I was going to say. The words of Bevis Levett seemed etched in my mind; and the threat he voiced seemed a menace not only to Nicholas, but to us all.

Nicholas, in hunting regalia, was just finishing a hurried breakfast. "I am so sorry I must rush away," he told me, "to join the hunt. Thank you for being such a wonderful hostess last evening. Everyone was loud in your praises. But if you will excuse me, dear Emma, I shall look forward to seeing you at dinner this evening." He waved to me and was gone.

After my morning consultation with Mrs. Partington, I started for the study. Crompton was just coming to find me. He smiled and said, "The books have just arrived from the bank in Wardcliffe. I have the general ledger here, if you would care to see it." He laid a large ledger open before me as I took my place at the desk.

I saw that every six months large sums of money came into the estate of Swanbrook Park. But I saw, also, that general income had declined over the past few years as there was no money coming from the farms that had been so profitable earlier.

The family owned extensive interests overseas. Tobacco in Havana, sugarcane in the West Indies, spices in the East Indies, silk mills in Bordeaux, property in New Orleans. Every six months, between 50 and 60 thousand pounds came flowing into the banking account of the estate. Enough to refurbish the farms, to repair the now dilapidated Park and restore its faded furnishings.

Then on the converse side of the ledger, large sums were shown to have been drawn from the account by Angus, with no record of their destination. There were also large bills itemized for perfume, hotel accommodations, visits abroad, and ladies' costumiers.

The books showed, too, that Nicholas had been paid a substantial salary for his duties as land-agent. But what did he do? I wondered. I knew he spent a minimum of time in the study each day; Crompton did all the letters and bookkeeping, recording everything in his thin, precise handwriting.

It was clear from the ledger that the decline in the business interests of the Colville family had taken place since the death of Sir Frederick. Angus had milked the family funds dry. The account's total was now very low.

I noted that the wages of Crompton and the rest of the household staff were scarcely adequate. I made up my mind, when the new drafts came, to increase them. I told Crompton this and he smiled with pleasure. I complimented him upon his books, that they were so clearly kept. When I left the study his delight was obvious and I felt I had made a firm friend.

I now had much to think about, but my thoughts and conclusions were so chaotic and unformed, I concluded it was better to keep them to myself. Nicholas returned for dinner after his day in the hunting field, his mood gay and lively. He made much of me, complimenting me upon my appearance and asking how I had passed my day.

All during dinner Cecile kept her head lowered and averted her eyes as Nicholas toasted me with his wine. Later, when Nicholas was decanting a new bottle of port, Cecile asked to speak to me privately. I led her to the morning room where she began to speak hesitantly. "I wish to tell you . . . I want you to be the first to know . . . I must leave Swanbrook Park. I did not truly expect to succeed with Nicholas, although I had hoped. . . . You know he is falling in love with you, don't you? It is so obvious, so clear to me. But you have not set out to take him from me. It is his decision and his own inclinations. Do not misunderstand me. He has made it plain that his affection for me is dead."

Cecile paused and raised her face to mine. Tears brimmed from her eyes to fall on the bodice of her one and only evening dress. She continued. "This is the way things often turn out for people like me. I am not French, nor is my mother a countess and married to a wealthy man. My mother is a ladies' maid—with French connections it is true. She is a widow of good repute who wanted me to have a station in life above her own. But in my heart, I felt I would not succeed.

"And now I myself must seek a position as a ladies' maid or companion or. . . . I must ask your help, if you feel you can give it. Could you recommend me, give me a character reference? Your assistance would help me to recover from my disappointment and help me start afresh."

I was moved by Cecile's confession and appeal. She had helped me greatly since I had inherited Swanbrook Park and her kindly nature had proved a comfort to me in moments of perplexity. On an impulse I said, "Will you allow me to mention this matter to Nicholas himself? He has many contacts and I feel sure we can rely upon his kindness and discretion."

She agreed and we returned together to the drawing room where Nicholas was waiting for us, the port decanted and three glasses ready on a silver tray.

Cecile told him without more ado of her situation and plight and Nicholas listened attentively. When she had finished Nicholas said to her, "I know that Elizabeth Levett, the wife of Bevis, is an invalid who requires a companion-attendant. I have arranged to see Bevis tomorrow and I can mention your name to him then. Would this suit you, Cecile? Elizabeth is not well known to me. She is rather a recluse and holds herself apart from Bevis's life. But I believe her to be kindly and good-natured. I feel sure you would be happy in their household and would find this situation ideal."

Cecile began to thank Nicholas and myself, and Nicholas poured us each a glass of wine. Shortly, Cecile excused herself and said she wished to go to her room to pack her belongings and prepare for her departure from the Park. At the door she turned to me. "Thank you for your efforts for me," she murmured. "I shall remember your kindness all my life. If in the future I can be of any help to you in any way, you have only to let me know."

Just before twelve o'clock the next morning, a most surprising event took place in my life.

Ethel came to me and said, "Mr. Mark Drummond has called, Miss Emma. He is asking to see you. I have shown him into the drawing room." She inclined her head and withdrew.

Quickly, I glanced in the Florentine mirror of the morning room, to be sure my appearance was acceptable for this unexpected caller. My auburn hair was longer now and it curled loosely upon my shoulders. I wore a dress of corded blue wool that Cecile had altered and improved. A bandeau of lighter blue set off the unaccustomed color in my face.

Showing a calmness I did not feel, I followed Ethel's steps to the drawing room. Mr. Drummond stood before the hearth, awaiting my arrival with a civil but somewhat sardonic smile upon his face.

"Forgive my unannounced intrusion, Miss Colville," he said. "Truth to tell, I have called on an impulse, without a letter or other means of introduction. Thank you for receiving me. I believe I shall not keep you long."

The man before me was tall, and with a strong, powerful build. His curly black hair was short for the times, and his dark eyes were direct and far-seeing. He held himself with pride, as if accountable to no one. But there was no arrogance in his stance; indeed, his demeanor was compassionate. I tried to still the unexpected fluttering of my heart, and indicated that Mr. Drummond should be seated. But he continued to stand.

"I am happy to receive you, Mr. Drummond," I said. "Though I am at a loss as to what business you may have that may concern me."

"That omission is soon rectified, ma'am," he said. "I have come to see you because I have heard that you have become a woman of business, since your inheritance of Swanbrook Park. As I believe always in dealing with the principal, I have come to make a profitable suggestion to you."

"Please continue, sir," I said. "I have no knowledge of anything at Swanbrook Park that may be profitable, as you suggest."

"Miss Colville, I have come to ask you to sell me your land and the four farms that you have inherited."

The effrontery of this suggestion took my breath away. I rose to my feet with a wild sense of indignation and even wilder dismay. "I think you are out of order, Mr. Drummond, even to think of such a thing. Let alone make me this proposition. Why, these lands have been in the hands of the Colville family for many years. It is unthinkable that I should sell them."

"Events move swiftly in this year of 1843," Mr. Drummond told me. "The whole country is in a state of transition. Have you not heard of the Industrial Revolution? It is not unseemly that you should consider selling your lands. I believe the estate could do with ready money. And you have no men of any consequence to take in hand your affairs and properly advise you."

These words angered me further. "I take amiss your comments about my financial state. Also, your remarks concerning my . . . concerning my advisers." Yet I knew his criticism of Nicholas was correct. He had read rightly the obvious signs of neglect the Park and estate presented to the world.

But Mr. Drummond took no cognizance of my indignation. He continued: "If you will sell me the farms, I will develop them myself. You could see your lands prosper from the windows of your house. The scene would be far different from what you are obliged to gaze at now." He indicated the view from the drawing room window of wide acres of neglect and decay.

"May I ask you what has prompted you to come to me with this proposition, at this time?"

He raised his brows and replied: "But, of course. The connection is obvious. Your clerk, William Crompton, has approached two employees of mine, Parsons and Ruskin. They are timekeeper and a charge-hand at my Ludorum Mill in Wardcliffe.

"These two men informed me of your request to see them, and of your intention to begin to farm, anew. I thought the prospect was difficult for a young woman, inexperienced and standing alone. I still consider it would be easier and more profitable for you to sell the land, and allow a more experienced person to develop the farms."

"But you are not a farmer, Mr. Drummond," I replied. "You are a millowner." And a highly unpopular one at that, I said to myself silently.

Mark Drummond smiled at me. "That is true. I am a millowner at this moment. But my early life was spent on a farm in Cumberland, the property of my father, now deceased, from whom I received a good grounding in husbandry and farm management. I have retained my interest in farming through Squire Pollock, who stables my horses and allows me the freedom of his lands.

"My father died when I was twelve years old and I was sent to live with my uncle, who owned the Ludorum Mill. I worked in the mill, starting at the lowliest level, that of the child crawling beneath the machinery to match up the frayed ends. As time went on, I progressed to other duties. And when my uncle died a few years ago, I became his heir."

I do not know why this chronicle of the past in a life previously unknown to me should have affected me so keenly. I looked at Mark Drummond with new eyes. I think I even smiled at him for he smiled back at me.

"Have you seen Barleystone Grange," he asked me, "the home of Squire and Mrs. Pollock? It is a beautiful house of the Georgian period, and the Squire and his wife are perfect hosts. If you would consider this, I could take you there one day. You would greatly enjoy seeing the place, and driving through the surrounding lands."

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Those who love deeply cannot age.

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero
The Princess and the
Butterfly

I laughed at his eagerness and the new turn the interview was taking. "Entirely as a matter of interest, Mr. Drummond, how much have you come prepared to pay me for *my* lands?" I could not keep the teasing tone from my voice.

He answered with seriousness. "I offer you ten percent above the market price of your lands. You could have the farms valued by an independent valuer, and I will abide by his decision whatever the price."

"No, Mr. Drummond," I said. "Make no mistake. There will be no sale. The Colville farms will never be yours." I surprised myself with my emphatic tone of voice and my certainty.

But just as I felt the purpose of the interview was over and I must offer Mr. Drummond refreshment, the door of the drawing room opened and Syriol came in.

I looked at her with amazement. She had spent much time in her room lately and had not ventured out-of-doors. But here she was, in a day outfit of beige wool, wearing a hat of pheasant feathers and velvet bows. She immediately addressed my visitor.

"Mr. Drummond, is it not? You will perhaps remember that we met one evening at the Town Hall in Wardcliffe. Angus was with me then."

"But of course, Miss Claverley," Mark Drummond replied. Syriol advanced toward him and he took her hand. "It is a great pleasure to see you again. Please accept my regrets concerning Angus's sad death."

Syriol nodded almost absently, and continued, "I saw your carriage from the bedroom window and I wondered. . . ? Would you allow me to drive back with you to Wardcliffe? I have some errands this course will save my having to bother Emma with a request for Hoskins and the brougham.

"I can return with Nicholas," Syriol continued. "I can call at Mr. Bevis Levett's house, and Nicholas will escort me home." And she smiled at Mark Drummond, raising her head and looking at him from under her long lashes.

Sudden turmoil assailed my former lightheartedness. I felt there was both calculation and effrontery in Syriol's behavior and request. Yet it was hard to object to her outward demeanor. Indeed, Mark Drummond seemed charmed by the prospect of her company.

"I shall be delighted to escort you to

Wardcliffe," he replied. "Fortune has smiled upon me today, more than I deserve." He bowed slightly and offered her his arm.

"Farewell, dear Emma," said Syriol with a smile. She laid her hand on Mark's arm as he escorted her to the door.

"Good day, Miss Emma," said Mark Drummond, with a bow. I thought I saw a gleam of amusement in his dark eyes. "I trust we shall meet again soon, and I shall look forward to the pleasure of that occasion."

I stood by the window and watched Mark hand Syriol into his carriage. As they drove away, I knew that tears, unexpected and certainly unwarranted, were raining down my face. I could not understand the anger, dismay and desolation that filled my heart.

Nicholas and Syriol returned together to Swanbrook Park just before dinner. Syriol went upstairs to change, but Nicholas came to seek me in the drawing room. The expression on his face betrayed his extreme anger.

"Syriol has told me of Mark Drummond's visit," he began. "Emma, I question the propriety of your receiving such a man alone."

"What can you possibly mean?" I cried. "Mr. Drummond's visit was not a social one, but a matter of business. He came to offer to buy the farms."

"I trust you gave him short shrift, Emma." I told Nicholas what had occurred. Although he frowned, he said, "Such a large sum of money would be very acceptable at the present time."

I knew for what purpose Nicholas could use a large sum of money and uneasiness filled my heart.

Nicholas was speaking to me again. "But you are so innocent, Emma. You do not understand the dangers. I cannot bear the thought of a man with Mark Drummond's reputation paying court to you."

"Paying court? There was no question of that. I believe you are jealous, Nicholas," I replied.

"Jealous or not, I could not bear to lose you, Emma." Nicholas came close to me and suddenly took me into his arms. He held me closely with a kind of hungry, feverish gesture. Then he let me go. Touching my hair with his hand, he said, "Forgive my ill humor. But I think you will understand the reason for my concern. It springs only from my affection for you and desire for your well-being."

Syriol waited until after dinner before she dropped her news. "I shall be moving out of the Park at the end of the week," she said. "I am going to stay at the Fox and Hounds Inn, in Deeping St. Paul. Truth to tell, Emma, I find the atmosphere too constricting here. The out-of-date conventions you have inherited interfere with my social life. I feel certain you will know what I mean."

I looked at Syriol across the tall vase of early spring flowers. Her beauty had blossomed, and there was a new vitality and air of eagerness about her. It was as if she had at last found her purpose and course in her life.

I was sure it was linked to Mark. Dismay and fear overcame me and the future seemed to darken.

They started arriving for their interviews. I was impressed by these men, now mill workers, who wished to return to the land. Mr. Parsons's, Mr. Ruskin's and Mr. Gibson's farms were given back. One man, younger than the rest, rougher in manner, appeared to me to be inexperienced.

"My father died recently," the young man told me. "I would dearly love to return to the Valley Holding, if you would grant me that. I was brought up there and my father taught me all he knew."

I felt some misgiving as I looked at Elias Springall. He was tall, rangily built, with a fresh complexion and bold, roving eyes. He was unmarried, which was a disadvantage. But he clearly wished to take over from his father, and at last I consented, but with some private reservations and doubts.

I tried to be as generous as I could in my monetary provisions for the restarting of the farms. I offered to provide money for initial repairs, and for seed and the restocking of the farms. The men were clearly pleased.

"You have been more than generous, Emma," Nicholas said to me icily when the farmers had gone. "I hope you will not live to regret this step in the future."

I did not think I should, for I knew I was doing what my father would have done. Later that day, the money drafts arrived by messenger from the agents in London. It seemed to me a fortune lay on the desk, close to my hand.

In addition to the large sums from the West Indies, Havana and Bordeaux, there was an unexpected draft from the sale of property in New Orleans. The amount stunned all of us.

"I never dreamed that the old warehouse would fetch so much," Nicholas cried. "It is far beyond our expectations. We must have a celebration to mark this occasion. A ball! We will invite the whole county. Crompton, leave us for a moment. I wish to speak to Miss Emma privately."

When he had gone, Nicholas said, "Let us have a wedding party. Let us be married, Emma, my dear. We can manage the Swanbrook Park estates together. Will you be my wife, my dear?" He drew me away from the desk and clasped me in his arms, whirling me about as if we were already dancing to the wedding music. I saw his smile, the brilliance of his eyes. I felt his arms around me and the warmth and pressure of his body.

Marriage to Nicholas. The man I had loved for so long. I pushed all misgivings away from me. I shut from my mind the memory of the scene in the hall with Bevis Levett. I only knew that my deepest wish was to be his wife.

Nicholas must have seen the expression on my face, for he did not wait for my reply. "Let us be married at Easter, dear Emma. That is not too long to wait."

But some instinct urged me not to hurry. "Let us wait until later in the year," I replied. "I want to redecorate and I would love to see the Park looking fresh for our wedding reception."

"As you wish, my dear," Nicholas said, but he was obviously disappointed.

"And let us have an unofficial engagement at the moment," I begged him. Yet I wondered at my request. I knew that I loved Nicholas with all my heart. Indeed, my happiness was so intense it threatened to overwhelm me. I clung to my fiancé, the anguish and pleasure of my love piercing my heart like a knife.

But Nicholas drew away from me; a shadow seemed to cloud his happiness.

That evening, Nicholas and I had been invited to a soirée given by a family living nearby. In the drawing room Nicholas awaited me. "What a pity we have to go out this evening," he said. "I hate the idea of sharing you with other people. However. . . ." He fetched my cloak from the chair in the hall. But as he drew it around my shoulders, he cried, "Emma, I forgot to ask you to endorse the drafts that arrived this afternoon. Will you do me the favor of signing them now?"

I looked at Nicholas with surprise. He continued, "Crompton must take *these drafts early tomorrow morning* to the bank in Wardcliffe, to pay them into the estate's account. He will wish to be off before you are about. We shall be home late tonight. Signing now will avoid inconvenience. It will take me only a moment to fetch the drafts from the study."

"But, Nicholas," I answered, "you know I like to scrutinize everything carefully before I sign it. And we have no time now. Please leave the matter until the morrow. I shall be up early, as always, and will see Crompton before he wishes to go."

"You are too serious-minded, my love," said Nicholas, smiling at me. "Your caution is misplaced on this occasion. I beg you to do as I ask. Crompton prefers to find the drafts already signed. Surely this is not too much to request?"

Nicholas took my silence for assent and went swiftly to the study, returning with a sheaf of papers. "See, Emma, sign here, where I have indicated."

I laughed a little, thinking he was making a mountain out of a molehill, but I took the pen and swiftly signed where Nicholas indicated. I was repaid by Nicholas's obvious glow of pleasure.

The next morning I was up early and saw Crompton leave with the drafts. Nicholas was busy all morning in the study and after luncheon he left the house without explanation. I busied myself planning the improvements to the house.

In the early afternoon a mood of foreboding swept over me. I roamed restlessly about the house. It seemed filled with a premonition of disaster. Cecile had gone, Syriol had gone, Nicholas was away. Mark Drummond. . . . I put him from my mind.

At last I yielded to the unspoken promptings of my unease, and made my way to the study where Crompton was attending to some correspondence.

"Crompton," I began, looking at his pale but attentive face, "could I see the bank books in which the business you transacted this morning is recorded?"

I was startled by the expression on his face; a thin line of sweat appeared beneath the sweep of his black hair. But he answered at once. "I am sorry, Miss Emma, but the bank books are now in the safe." He indicated the iron safe in a corner of the study.

"Could you not open the safe, Crompton?" I asked.

"I regret this, Miss, but Mr. Nicholas has the key. He himself locked the books away and he has gone into Wardcliffe, taking the key with him."

"Then I must wait until he returns," I answered equably.

Crompton replied, "I fear you will not see Mr. Nicholas today. He informed me he is taking dinner with Mr. Bevis Levett."

"Were the checks for the household wages among those I signed last night?" I asked Crompton.

"Yes, Miss Emma," Crompton replied. And I knew then that Nicholas had received his large and handsome allowance from my hands and, with a sure flash of instinct, I knew that he had taken his money and gone into Wardcliffe to gamble.

I left the study. I no longer roamed restlessly about the house but sat alone in the drawing room. A fire was burning brightly, but in spite of the warmth I felt chilled, deserted and alone. I thought again of the terrible debt Nicholas owed Bevis Levett. And I faced what seemed to me to be my inescapable course. I would settle Nicholas's outstanding commitment to Bevis, and free him from debt.

Perhaps my half-formed resolve to repay the debt accounted for my wish to delay the marriage. Perhaps more than the two half years with their drafts must pass before I could clear Nicholas's indebtedness to Bevis. But clear it we must, and before our marriage. I was adamant.

I went to bed but could not sleep and lay staring into the cold and empty night. In the early hours of the morning I heard a carriage arrive, and someone enter the house. After an hour or so of troubled thought I got up, lit a candle and went below. I made my way, as if drawn by unseen forces, to the study.

I lit the lamp. Immediately, the lamplight glinted upon something metal on the desk. On the blotting pad there was a ring bearing two keys. The keys of the safe. I took them and crossed to the safe.

Within moments, I had turned it open. On the top shelf was the bank book, engraved LONDON AND METROPOLITAN BANK. I carried it to the desk. I saw immediately that the total amount of all the drafts from the London agents had been paid into the account. These drafts totalled 67,000 pounds.

Against this sum other checks had been drawn—payments to the staff, to the provision dealer, the wine merchant, the stableman, and Nicholas had drawn his salary as land-agent; a sum I considered would go far toward paying off his debt to Bevis Levett.

But Nicholas had not done this. For the final draft of withdrawal was plainly recorded—the sum of 27,000 pounds to Bevis Levett, Esquire. And against this sum was written: *Monies payable to Mr. Levett for investment in the Victory Mill.*

What investment? I asked myself. This had never been discussed or agreed upon. The amount was the same amount as the debt. Nicholas had paid his gaming debt.

* * *

Love spends his all, and still hath store.

Philip James Bailey
Festus: A Large Party and
Entertainment

* * *

I replaced the bank book in the safe, relocked the padlock and left the keys on the desk. Slowly, I went back to bed.

My love for Nicholas had received a grievous blow. I knew that many women settled their husband's debts before marriage. And indeed, I had made up my mind to do this. But to be tricked into paying this large sum, before marriage, by false pretences. . . . This seemed unforgivable, and beyond explanation.

I fell into a fitful sleep, promising myself to be up early to see Nicholas first thing in the morning and ask, not only for an explanation, but what could be done to restore this sorry situation. But when I went downstairs in the cold spring light, I found Nicholas had forestalled me. He had already left the house with the excuse that he was going hunting. He left no message regarding the time of his return.

It was clear Nicholas was avoiding me. Why? I puzzled. Then I knew. *One day,* this one day was all that was required. . . . But in that moment my mind was made up and I knew I must act without a moment's delay.

I sent Ethel to tell Hoskins to bring the carriage round immediately. Within minutes the coach was leaving the Park and facing the long road which wound through the valley—the road which led to my destination, Wardcliffe.

I had never visited Wardcliffe before and it seemed another world, a thousand miles away. I was unprepared for the drab and forbidding aspect of the town and its neighborhoods.

It was blackened by the smoke of the factory chimneys; the poor dwellings were dilapidated and crushed together in long rows of mean streets. I saw the mills with their huge walls and barred, prison-like windows. I heard the clank of machinery as the coach sped by; the fumes were stifling and I was nearly overcome by the acrid gases.

The shopping center of the town was clearly in better condition, and I glimpsed a pleasant residential quarter beyond the working neighborhoods. Many wealthy people lived in Wardcliffe but I saw no evidence of them today. Instead, I felt saddened into grief by the working conditions of many men and women.

Hoskins drew up at last in front of the LONDON AND METROPOLITAN BANK, and helped me to alight. I thanked him and bade him wait. Putting on as bold a front as I could muster, I pushed open the bank door and went inside.

"May I see Mr. Samuelson, the manager, please?" I asked a clerk.

Surprise was clear on the man's face. "Have you an appointment, Miss?"

"No. But please tell Mr. Samuelson that Miss Emma Colville wishes to speak with him. And that the matter is urgent." With reluctance, the man went away.

Within a moment, he was back. "Please step this way, Miss Colville. Mr. Samuelson is at your service." And with a wildly beating heart, I entered the office of the manager of the bank.

Mr. Samuelson had black hair, a black beard and keen black eyes. He held my hand a moment and said, "I am honored to meet the owner of the Swanbrook Park estates. Please accept my congratulations, and know that I, and my bank, are always at your loyal service."

I thanked Mr. Samuelson for his sentiments, and plunged without preamble into the reason for my visit. "Mr. Samuelson, I have come to ask you if it is possible to stop the payment of a draft, which I have signed, and which was paid into your bank yesterday."

"The request is unusual," Mr. Samuelson replied. "Will you please give me details of this transaction, so that I may better judge this matter?"

"The draft is for 27,000 pounds," I said. "Made payable to Mr. Bevis Levett."

"It so happens," Mr. Samuelson said thoughtfully, "that Mr. Bevis Levett is also a customer of this bank, and the draft is even now before the clerk, awaiting his entering the sum into Mr. Levett's account."

"Please act swiftly, Mr. Samuelson. I assure you of the urgency of this matter, and that it is my wish that this draft be withdrawn."

The bank manager hesitated, looked at me keenly, then called for his personal clerk and gave the order that the entries to Mr. Levett's account were to be stayed. He was assured that the draft was not yet entered.

"I must ask that this draft be returned to me, please, Mr. Samuelson," I said.

Mr. Samuelson nodded. "I concluded so much," he said. "And I will not ask you for further details, which are clearly personal and private to yourself. You are quite within your rights to stop payment of this draft, and to gain possession of it," he assured me. "Since you are the fully accredited head of Swanbrook Park, and I have before me the confirmation of your position, signed by Mr. Bardwell. But for my own protection, I must ask you to sign this authorization. Believe me, I cannot comply with your request unless I have that."

I sat down. My strength seemed to desert me. I suddenly doubted the wisdom of my course and began to tremble. But in Mr. Samuelson's eyes, I thought I saw a glimmer of respect. He swiftly wrote a brief authorization on the bank's notepaper and passed it to me. I signed where he indicated and within a few moments he placed the check in my hands.

I folded the oblong of white paper and placed it in my bag. A brief glimpse had told me all I wanted to know. My signature, Nicholas's handwriting, Bevis Levett the recipient of the 27,000 pounds, the endorsement, the date. . . .

Mr. Samuelson escorted me to the door of his office. I tried to keep from him the emotion I was feeling. But on my way out of the bank my emotions overcame me. Tears sprang into my eyes. I was too proud to dash them away, and at the door, my vision obscured, I bumped headlong into the tall figure of a man.

Two hands gripped my arms; a masculine strength saved me from falling. Through the blur of tears I looked upward. I saw that it was Mark Drummond who was supporting me.

"Miss Colville," he cried. "What are you doing here? And in this state. Let me assist you. My carriage is outside. You cannot go further alone." He placed his arm around my waist, and half led, half helped me across the pavement toward his carriage.

I knew I was near fainting. I allowed Mark Drummond to assist me into his carriage. I saw him go and speak to Hoskins, and send my own conveyance away. Then Mr. Drummond mounted the coach to sit beside me. He gave me his handkerchief and I dried my eyes.

I was suddenly determined that Mark Drummond should know nothing of the circumstances which had driven me to the bank. I dreaded his censure of Nicholas. And of myself. "Please excuse this weakness," I said. I made a determined effort to gather my wits. "Perhaps a slight chill, or a headache. A. . . ." My words faltered. Facing those intent dark eyes, I knew Mark did not believe a word I was saying.

"I take a light midday meal in the privacy of my home," Mark said. "I pray you to join me." The kindly common sense of his words assisted me. I began to recover my composure.

I realized suddenly that we had traveled to the outskirts of Wardcliffe, and that the carriage had stopped outside an imposing, squarely-built house. "This is my home, Syone House," Mark Drummond said.

The house was Victorian in design and execution; within was the solidity of mahogany, of Persian carpets, of gleaming silver. Here was no psuedo-Italianate style, no shabbiness, no pretensions. Here was warmth, comfort, stability.

Mrs. Talbot, Mark Drummond's housekeeper, received me and took me to a room upstairs. After bathing my face and combing my hair, I descended the stairs to find Mark awaiting me in the dining room. There was a cold collation and a carafe of wine arranged on the polished table. I was extremely hungry. Mark Drummond spoke no word, and I drank the wine gratefully and accepted some roast beef and salad. I felt my spirits revive and began to look with renewed interest at the man before me.

Mark sat on the other side of the table, totally relaxed, enjoying his meal and playing the courteous host. Suddenly, he began to talk about himself.

I appreciated his stratagem, which was clearly to obliterate from my mind the memories of the morning; and then, in spite of myself, I listened, enthralled. Mark Drummond was telling me of his early life in Cumberland on the farm and then of his long apprenticeship in the Ludorum Mill.

He spoke without self-pity, but I

realized that his had been no easy life. When he touched on present day Wardcliffe, I said, “Today was the first time I had seen this town. I hated the dirt, the grime, the prison-like mills. It is terrible to think that human beings have to spend their lives in these places. Is there nothing to relieve the dreadful conditions of their lives?”

An expression of eagerness passed over Mark Drummond's face. “A great deal can be done, and is being done,” he told me. “Perhaps you know that at the Ludorum Mill, I have cut the working hours to ten per day. I hope shortly to lower the hours to eight.

“I am opening a room, well-warmed and lighted, so that mothers may leave their children there. It is called a crèche,” he told me. “I have found a nurse to be in attendance. I have introduced shift-work for those who prefer it. And paid holidays. But all these measures have made me unpopular,” he said. “The other mill-owners do not approve. But I am determined to go forward. The better spirit, the increased happiness of the workers, fully repay me for my efforts and the opposition I face.”

I felt at this moment that I was taking up Mark Drummond's time, in what was clearly a full and eventful life. I rose and asked him to excuse my departure. I thanked him for coming to my assistance. I did not tell him that I had enjoyed my talk with him in Syone House, more than I had enjoyed anything for a long time. My sense of peace and happiness must be my own secret.

Then, as Mark was helping me into his carriage which would take me back to Swanbrook Park, I saw another carriage sweep by and the face of Syriol turned to observe Mark and myself. I saw her look, close and inscrutable, as she sat alone. Then she was gone.

A sensation of distress and apprehension spread over me, as if there was some threat, some menace to me in the air.

Nicholas arrived late in the afternoon. He smiled when he saw me awaiting him beside the fire in the dining room, and crossed eagerly to my side. Upon his face was an expression of pleasure and satisfaction.

As Nicholas poured the habitual sherry on a side table, I pondered what course his explanation would have taken, had I not found out about his misappropriation of monies. I sipped the sherry and waited for Nicholas to see the draft that I had placed upon the table.

The sherry spilled in his hand when he at last saw the check beside his place at the dining table. The color drained from his face. He turned to face me. “What is the meaning of this, Emma?” he asked me. “Has this not been credited to Bevis's account?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I stopped payment.”

“You stopped payment. . . .”

I saw total comprehension of the situation gradually flood his eyes. He stood rigid, a man under shock and stress.

“How dare you do this to me, Emma?” he cried. “You love me. You are the woman I love. How could you demean me in the eys of. . . .”

“Of Bevis Levett to whom you owe this amount for gambling debts,” I finished.

Nicholas had been caught off guard. There was no chance to talk of investment, or to try any other evasion.

“I admit this is true,” he countered. “How did you know?”

“I overheard you talking after the dinner party. I was on the landing, you and Bevis Levett in the hall below.”

“Scarcely the occupation of a lady, for the new owner of Swanbrook Park, eavesdropping like a servant,” Nicholas answered acidly.

“I refuse to let you anger me, Nicholas,” I replied.

“I anger you? Believe me, Emma, it is I who bear the utmost anger and repugnance toward you.”

I came and stood before Nicholas, fronting him with a courage I did not feel. “Why did you not come to me and tell me of the situation, Nicholas?”

This was a cry from the heart. How different things would have been had he taken me into his confidence. I felt he had regarded me as a child, and had underrated my feelings and my intelligence.

He seemed affected by my words. “I did not wish to demean myself in your eyes,” he answered quietly. “I did not wish to lose your affection, or your respect.”

“We each have our failings,” I said. “And knowing the social life that has been led for years at Swanbrook Park, would this lapse have alarmed me so greatly?”

“But you have led a sheltered existence,” Nicholas cried. “I did not dare upset you.”

“Yet by your deception, Nicholas,” I answered, “you have driven a greater wedge between us. Oh, why did you not love me enought to trust me?” I said. “I would have given you the money had you asked. Had you taken me into your confidence, I would have begun to clear your debt before our marriage—in confidence and with no one the wiser.”

Nicholas held my two arms in his hands; his wondering eyes were fixed upon mine. “So it has all been in vain,” he said, almost to himself. “I have chanced so much and gained nothing.”

And suddenly he was blazingly angry. I saw the fury mount in his expression. He seized my shoulders in his hands and held me tightly till I felt my flesh bruise. “We shall soon be married, Emma. You have promised me to wed later this year. And after that . . . in so short a time. . . .”

In so short a time, after our marriage, everything you own will come under my control, and be at my disposal. . . .

The words were not said, but they hung in the air like pennants. I pulled myself from his grasp, and Nicholas in his fury thrust me from him. I fell into a chair. I knew in that moment that Nicholas's great and overriding desire, his ambition, and the aim of his life was to own the lands, the monies, the house and the estates of Swanbrook Park.

He wished to obtain these properties at all costs. To do this, he must marry me. He had no great love for me, I knew. He had only a burning desire to gain my possessions. In that same moment, realizing this, the love I had borne for Nicholas so ardently failed within me and died.

The next morning I was awakened early by the clamor of voices and a knocking at my door. I rose swiftly as Ethel entered.

“Mr. Crompton, Miss Emma. He has been found in the stableyard, unconscious, with head injuries. He must have fallen, or one of the horses must have got loose and injured him. Mrs. Partington and Hoskins are bringing him indoors. Mrs. Partington requests that you should come quickly, as she wishes to know what to do."

I ran down the stairs, and there in the hall they had temporarily laid the unconscious Crompton. His face was deathly pale, and one side of his head was a tangle of bloody, matted hair.

"Let us take him upstairs to the spare room, next to your own room, Mrs. Partington," I said. "Ethel. Please bring a warming pan for the bed and hot water to bathe the wound. Hoskins, you must go with all speed into Wardcliffe and fetch Dr. Speight." Everyone engaged themselves upon their errands; and within a short time Crompton lay between the sheets in the spare room, with a clean bandage around his head.

At this moment Nicholas returned home. Any awkwardness between us was erased by the need to attend to Crompton. Nicholas was deeply concerned about his clerk, and offered his services in any way I should think fit.

When Crompton was comfortable and could be left, Nicholas drew me aside into the library. There was a nosegay of spring flowers on the desk and a tiny red velvet cushion on which lay a bracelet.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am about the events of last evening," Nicholas began. "I must have been demented to have behaved in such a way. I trust you will understand my anger and forgive me. And know that I was distressed only because I love you so dearly. It was the intensity of my love which caused me to behave as I did. Forgive me, dearest Emma. And accept these gifts with my love."

He placed the flowers in my hands, and slipped the bracelet around my wrist.

"I see now, after reflection, that you were quite right to behave as you did," Nicholas resumed soberly. "I was in the wrong to present the draft without your knowledge and permission. Believe me, no harm was meant, no base motive prompted me to do this. I merely anticipated our marriage a little. And the entry in the ledger was not for deception, but for bookkeeping purposes only. But I understand now your reactions, and see that you have justice and right on your side. Have you the draft nearby?" he added, and he watched me closely.

"It is here, Nicholas," I said, drawing it out of a drawer in the library desk.

He took the draft in his hands and tore it into many pieces. "That is the end of the matter," he said firmly. "I will find some other way to discharge my debt to Bevis. I will think of something. I only wish to be worthy of you and to have your good opinion. Believe me, this is the end and purpose of my life."

He raised my hand to his lips and kissed my palm. I gazed at his long fair hair as he bent over my hand, felt the light brushing of his lips on my skin. I held the flowers in my free hand, the gold links of his bracelet moving against my wrist.

Later that day, Mrs. Partington came to tell me that Cecile had called. I was delighted to see her and we went into the morning room together.

"It was my free day in Wardcliffe," she said. "I was out shopping when I met Dr. Speight. I know him well. He attends Mrs. Levett. He happened to mention that he had been urgently called to Swanbrook Park, and on impulse I begged to accompany him. I thought if there was some adverse circumstance, I could assist. Please tell me what I can do."

I told Cecile at once of Crompton's accident, and accompanied her to his room. Crompton had now recovered consciousness. The doctor was just withdrawing, giving instructions to Mrs. Partington. Cecile halted by Crompton's bed.

A faint flush crept into Crompton's pallid cheek. Cecile held his hand within hers for a moment. She seemed deeply affected by his injury. I left them together and went out to the landing to speak to Dr. Speight.

He stood alone, in deep thought. "I fear this is no accident, Miss Colville," he told me. "The position of the wound makes injury from a fall unlikely. I fear your clerk has been attacked. There is no other explanation. Someone came up behind him in the darkness and struck him a blow on the head and shoulder with a heavy instrument. There are many malefactors about," he informed me. "I advise you to lock and bar your doors, and instruct your outside staff to be on their guard."

I thanked the doctor, and watched him go. A fear, an unease and a suspicion filled my mind.

At the end of the week, I was very surprised to receive a message. "A messenger called from Mr. Mackiness, while you were out, Miss Emma," Mrs. Partington told me. "He asked me to request you to take dinner with Mr. Bardwell this evening. Mr. Bardwell has some business to discuss with you, and he has arranged for a meal to be served at the Fox and Hounds. The time is six-thirty. He trusts you will be able to attend."

I wondered what the business could be that we were to discuss. At six o'clock I requested that Hoskins drive me to the inn. At the door I dismissed him, certain that Mr. Bardwell would escort me home.

I had never been to the Fox and Hounds before or indeed, to any public place such as this. I felt a wave of embarrassment entering alone, for the entrance was thronged with men from a shooting party. Women members of their company awaited them in the hall. The men moved courteously aside to make room for me; yet I still felt conspicuous to be unescorted.

There appeared to be no sign of my host, so I approached an open door, guessing it must lead to the dining room. I stood on the threshold and surveyed the scene within. Several parties were dining, but Mr. Bardwell was nowhere to be seen. The oak-beamed room was gleaming with white nappery and polished silver. Then in the center of the room I saw two people dining tête-à-tête. I saw the smiling face of the woman, her gaze attentive upon the man. He was talking; her brilliant eyes were flashing. It was Syriol, dining alone with Mark Drummond.

I had felt the color flame in my cheeks as I saw Mark; now I felt the blood recede. I seemed rooted to the spot; Mark and Syriol did not see me, yet I could not tear my eyes from them. Syriol was dressed in red; a glowing magenta velvet cut low over her breasts. Her dark hair was beautifully coiffured; she wore a necklace of diamonds and amethysts; rings flashed on her long, elegant hands.

Suddenly I heard a movement behind me, a voice uttered my name. I turned to see both Nicholas and Bevis Levett approaching me. "Emma. What are you doing here? And alone." Nicholas was clearly amazed by my presence. "Mr. Bardwell?" he repeated. "I see no sign of him. Wait a moment, dear Emma, and I will enquire from the innkeeper as to where your host for the evening has gone."

Within a few moments he returned. "I am told that Mr. Bardwell has sent a message that he is delayed and cannot meet you. So you must surrender yourself for the evening to the company of Bevis and myself. We are dining here. You must join us. You will enjoy it, I am sure." On the crest of

Nicholas's enthusiasm, I entered the dining room escorted on either side by Nicholas and Bevis Levett.

The two men went instantly to pay their respects to Syriol and Mark Drummond at their table in the center of the room. Mark Drummond was not overly pleased to see Nicholas and Bevis, and he was clearly taken aback to see me.

"The Fox and Hounds is crowded this evening," Nicholas was saying easily to Mark Drummond. "And you have a large table, Mark. May we have the pleasure of joining you?"

"By all means," Mark Drummond replied. And within a short space of time we were all seated at the table, an unexpected party of five.

I wish I could remember this meal, but I cannot. Syriol was pleasant toward us, yet clearly we were interlopers. She tried to shut us out, to continue her close attention to Mark. But Mark had fallen silent. His face was flushed and he was clearly in the grip of some powerful emotion.

But Nicholas and Bevis continued their light, bantering conversation. I sat stiff and silent, scarcely raising my eyes from my plate. As the meal progressed a wave of despair swept over me.

The awkward meal ended at last. Nicholas, Bevis and I rose to go. We said farewell, but I did not offer my hand to Mark, feeling I could not bear his touch. Nor could I meet the look of satisfaction in Syriol's eyes.

Nicholas handed me into Bevis Levett's carriage. "Were you surprised to see Syriol and Mark Drummond?" he asked me. "They are almost lovers, my dear. They have been meeting for some time at the Fox and Hounds.

"That was why she moved out of Swanbrook Park," he continued, "to be available for his attention."

At Swanbrook Park the three of us entered the library, and Nicholas mixed drinks for himself and Bevis.

When Nicholas left us for a moment, Bevis approached my chair. "I am told that you have given your word to wed Nicholas later this year," he said. "Though I believe that recent events may have unsettled your intention. Nicholas is a worthy man. He will make you a devoted and kindly partner. He has told me of your wish to administer the estates. Nicholas is skilled in land management and will be able to give you good assistance. Together, you will make a success of the management of Swanbrook Park."

Bevis paused and I looked up at him. His eyes were intently fixed upon me; they had compelling power.

"Nicholas has told me, too, of his misdemeanor concerning the draft drawn in my favor," Bevis resumed. "He acted out of turn, and I told him so, and he has expressed his regret. But I cannot believe you will be so small-minded as to bear a grudge against him; especially since he has destroyed this draft and has restored the status quo."

This statement affected me deeply, for the matter of Nicholas's destroying the draft had influenced me in his favor. I began to speak, but Bevis raised his hand as if to stay me. "I will speak further upon the matter of the draft in a moment," Bevis continued. "In the meantime, I cannot believe you have any serious doubts concerning your marriage to Nicholas, for I believe this is what your father would have wished you to do.

"Hugh was very fond of Nicholas. He regarded him as a closer relation than that of second cousin. Sir Frederick regarded him as a son. I am certain you will be fulfilling your father's wish if you marry Nicholas, my dear.

"Also, the county expects it. They will regard your behavior as shabby if you deny Nicholas his right to share your home—which has for so long been his. And we cannot live without the approval of society, my dear."

I agreed with so much that Bevis was saying, but the matter of Nicholas's continuing debt to Bevis weighed heavily upon me. As if he read my thoughts, Bevis resumed:

"I know you are dismayed by the amount of the debt. I know also it was your earlier wish that the debt should be discharged before your marriage, and that mistakes were made and misunderstandings occurred.

"But Nicholas has of his own free will accepted this earlier provision, and wishes to honor it. He wants to please you in all things. You must give him credit for this. I also wish to aid you. I have made up my mind to assist Nicholas to discharge this debt to me, now that he has become betrothed to you. There will be only one small condition for Nicholas to fulfill," Bevis continued. "A small commission he can easily carry out.

"I make this condition because Nicholas is a proud man, and without this commission he would regard my clearing the debt as charity. I do not wish him to see it in this light. Therefore, leave the matter to me to arrange, Emma. I assure you I act from the highest motives for you both. No one will rejoice in your joint happiness more deeply than myself."

I continued to look at Bevis Levett. I was disturbed, for Bevis Levett had made it clear to me that it was only my promise of marriage to Nicholas that would make Bevis arrange for the clearance of the debt.

I felt I was being pushed firmly, steadily and irrevocably into marriage with Nicholas. I felt in the grip of strong power, a force I had not encountered before. Then I bowed my head so that Bevis could not read the expression in my eyes.

In some totally inexplicable way I saw in my mind's eye the figure of Mark Drummond before me in this house. Then I saw him dining tête-à-tête with Syriol at the Fox and Hounds. A terrible sense of disappointment filled me. I told myself that Mark was a single man: free to court whom he wished; free to support a woman of less than impregnable virtue, if he so desired. But the very thought of this man in this connection, dismayed and appalled me. I felt cheated by him, deceived and betrayed.

I remembered a conversation I had heard recently between the cook and Ethel: "Miss Syriol Claverley is to be seen often in Wardcliffe, driving in a carriage. She has set her eyes upon her millowner, and I am told nothing will stop her until she has him as her own."

"She fully intends to marry this millowner, then? I wonder how long his resistance can hold out?"

Bevis Levett's eyes were searching my face. I raised my gaze to his. He smiled with satisfaction and withdrew from me a little, as if to lighten the atmosphere.

Nicholas entered the room carrying a new box of cigars and a bottle of port. And soon he and Bevis were talking, laughing, telling me anecdotes, making much of me. It was as if they were showing me how heartwarming and strengthening was their support; how pleasant and sure my life in the future could be.

Imperceptibly, the days lengthened and summer came upon our corner of the earth. The clouds moved high in the sky; the grass became verdant green, wild flowers dotted the edges of the long road which crossed the valley.

Cecile continued to visit Crompton, and his health steadily improved. I had a talk with Dr. Speight and enquired as to possible treatment for Crompton's disability. The doctor told me he was of the opinion that Crompton's lameness could be helped by traction, exercises, and a slight adjustment to the level of his boots. I asked him to discuss this with Crompton, and guaranteed to pay the bills for the treatment.

Subsequently, there was a marked improvement in Crompton's health and spirits. He felt able to return to the study, to keep abreast of the daily tasks.

During this time, Nicholas set himself to be a charming companion, and to be of service to me in any way I required. After the conversation with Bevis, I had agreed to become formally engaged to Nicholas, and the date for our wedding had been set for Michaelmas Day—the twenty-ninth of September. No mention had been made of the debt, or Bevis's stratagem. Nicholas seemed satisfied with the position, and the conditions.

When I was alone I pondered my feelings for Nicholas. I could deny that my love had died, that a kind of affection for him filled me still.

I knew that Nicholas still met Bevis Levett for gaming parties in Wardcliffe, but no parties had been given at Swanbrook Park. One morning Nicholas came to me with a leather pouch full of sovereigns. He laid them in my hands.

"Dame Fortune smiled on me last night," he said. "These are my winnings. Keep them for me, dearest Emma. They will go a little toward paying off my indebtedness to Bevis.

"Five hundred and seventy-four golden devils," he cried. "Your touch on them will bring me luck. I shall try again, tonight. Only the right cards, and I could soon free myself from Bevis. I long for the day, dear Emma, when I can come to you not only a free, but a wealthy man."

"Is there no other way for you to earn your fortune, Nicholas?" I asked him. "Could you not study for a career? Become a lawyer, perhaps? I am certain Mr. Bardwell would assist you to become qualified."

But Nicholas only laughed at me, though not unkindly, and I knew my words were in vain. Nicholas had been brought up to be a country gentleman of these times, and he saw for himself no other way of life.

It was to allay the sense of unease and disappointment which assailed me after this interview, that I decided to make a tour of the farms.

I was well received at the Grange Farm, where progress was a little slower. But things were going apace at the Upland Fields Farm. Here I paused to take tea and to sample the baking, fresh from the oven of Mrs. Gibson. Again I saw stock in good heart, and crops clearly moving to an abundant harvest.

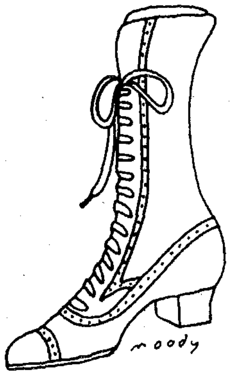
I had left the Valley Holding until last. This was the farm of Elias Springall, and about Mr. Springall I continued to have grave doubts. I had heard uncomplimentary reports of his behavior from the other farmers—he was neglectful, a sponger, unreliable. I determined, now that the rest of the visits were over, to call to see Springall and his Holding for myself.

Rosebud and I continued to jog our way across the valley toward the boundaries of Squire Pollock's land. The Holding was quite near the boundary and set, rather remotely, near to woods and plantations which were part of Squire Pollock's estate. As we progressed through the green uplands, I thought again of a disturbing incident which had taken place only a few days ago.

I had been certain that I saw Springall in the stableyard, talking to Nicholas. I had heard, distantly, their raised voices. But when I mentioned this incident to Nicholas, he had been surprised. "Springall? Here?" he had said. "You are mistaken, Emma. Springall has not been here, to my knowledge, since you interviewed him some time ago."

I did not press the matter as it was possible I had been mistaken. But the disturbing impression remained.

Suddenly, on the skyline, breaking into my thoughts, I saw the figure of a horseman. I saw the huge, rangy black horse and the man astride him. Black hair, dark eyes, a serious, unsmiling face. My heart began to thump against my chest.



Mark Drummond waved his arm in greeting and crossed the barrier between the two estates. "Good day, Miss Colville," he said. "May I enquire as to where you are riding?"

I reined in and said, "My destination is a private one, Mr. Drummond, and does not concern you or anyone else."

He nodded, as if he had expected the rebuff. "Pardon my presumption," he said. "My enquiry was not made from idle curiosity, but with your welfare in mind."

"I am quite able to take care of myself," I told him. "Also, sir, are you aware that you are trespassing? This land is Colville land. You have crossed the barrier between this land and Squire Pollock's estate."

"I am aware of this," Mark replied dryly, and I caught the flash of amusement in his eyes. "But my wish to speak with you overcame my caution. Are you proposing to visit Elias Springall? The Valley farmland is nearby. May I escort you to the door?"

"I do not wish an escort," I said. "Elias Springall is a tenant of this farm and I wish to visit him. Our conversation will naturally be private. Please stand aside and let me pass."

The big black horse was blocking my way. Rosebud had become nervous at the presence of this masculine monster. Truth to tell, I felt some nervousness also. I was not adept enough to back Rosebud out of the way, nor yet to advance and cross the black horse's path.

"Nimrod is harmless," Mark Drummond said, his face softening as he patted and calmed the rangy mount. "I feel reluctance to allow you to proceed alone," Mark told me. "Do you not know that Springall is an uncertain customer? He is a young man of violence, with an evil temper. I am afraid you may court disaster if you approach him unescorted."

"What nonsense," I cried. "I have already interviewed Springall. He is a man of spirit, but I am convinced I shall be quite safe." So saying, I urged Rosebud forward, and we passed out of range of Nimrod and his rider.

I passed through a grove of trees to approach the farm, and was disappointed to see that the land lay completely neglected; hardly any sowing had been done. The approach to the farmhouse was littered with debris. A starving mongrel dog approached, then turned tail and slunk away. There was clearly no livestock in the deserted and tumble-down barns.

I tied up Rosebud in a nearby copse,

and approached the front door of the farm house. When I knocked, the door swung open, and I could see into the living room of the house. Springall was seated asprawl at a center table on which were the remains of a meal. Fat had congealed upon the plates, empty bottles of stout stood beneath the table. Springall was clutching a glass.

The room was filthy beyond description and littered with useless rubbish. A dreadful sense of regret filled my heart. It was clear that I had been cheated, for Springall had taken the money for seed, stock and improvements, and had obviously done nothing. I stepped into the room and faced the man before me, speechless.

Springall lumbered to his feet. I saw his barrel-chest, his trunk-like legs. His eyes were bloodshot and his speech slurred. He addressed me, "So, Miss Colville, the famous lady landowner has deigned to visit her humble tenant." He waved his glass at me and the beer slopped on the table.

"Pray be seated, ma'am," he said. "It cannot be said that Elias Springall does not observe his manners. This is no palace, my lady, but the humble abode of a working man. But you are welcome. Welcome indeed. Are you alone?" he added narrowly. "You are doubly welcome if you are alone. Draw up a chair and I will pour you a drink. Brown ale," he said. "There is nothing to beat brown ale."

Springall was obviously in no state to discuss matters, monetary or otherwise, concerning the farm. To get any sense out of him, I must return accompanied by Nicholas and Crompton. "Good day, Springall," I said quietly. "I will visit you another time to discuss the farm. Then I will ask you to come to Swanbrook Park for a reckoning. You will no doubt have explanations to make to my land-agent and my clerk. I also shall be very interested in what you have to say."

"Harsh words from a beautiful lady," Springall said. "And not so fast with your departure," he added. He left the table and crossed the room with surprising speed. To my dismay he stood with his broad back against the closed door of the room.

"There are two sides to every question, ma'am," he told me. And take me, for instance. . . ." Although is speech was slurred, the words were surprisingly clear. "You see me as a lout, a clod, a member of the lower orders not fit to address you as an equal. Yet I also have natural feelings. I love life, I can sip ale, I can walk with my dog in the woods . . . I can poach game from Squire Pollock . . . and I can fancy a woman."

I shrank from him, appalled. The smell of his unwashed clothes, his beer-stained breath enveloped and sickened me.

"Stand aside," I said. "And allow me to take my departure."

"You are not leaving, my lady, are you?" Springall faced me with mock surprise. "You do not wish to hear what I have to say? I have a proposition to put to you. Something to your advantage you might like to hear."

"Many highborn ladies take lovers of a lesser degree. It is well known. A sign of the times. Ladies who look too pure to kiss welcome the advances of a humble man. They like a change from their gentlemen. They like to feel a real man's arms about them. They like his mouth. They like to feel his hands upon their buttocks, their. . . .

"You could visit me in secret. No one would know. I would. . . ." Words failed him, and Springall groped toward me with his filthy hands.

"Stand clear, Springall," said a voice behind us. The front door of the farm had opened and Mark Drummond had entered the room.

"Stand aside. Quite clear of Miss Colville. Emma, come and take your place behind me. Beside the door."

I did as I was bid. Mark advanced into the room and faced Springall. Springall cried, "By what right do you enter this house? This is my home. I am entertaining my landlady. What goes on between us is no concern of yours." He faced Mark's stern, implacable face. Springall's own face was contorted in hideous outrage and anger. He seized an empty bottle and smashed it against the table, standing armed with the terrible weapon of broken glass.

Springall struck the first blow. He lunged at Mark who countered the broken bottle with his arm. But the thrust was strong and vicious. The side of the bottle struck Mark's face, and blood spurted from the wound and fell upon the collar of his coat.

The broken bottle was suddenly shattered from Springall's hand. Mark hit out with his right arm and his fist connected with Springall's chin. Springall fell backward, into a kitchen chair. It broke beneath the onslaught and Springall fell to the floor.

Mark instantly crossed to his side and helped him up and to another chair. Springall sprawled there, semi-conscious, his face bruised, his manner greatly changed. Gone was the boasting, drunken ruffian; he sat defeated and cowed; he was sobering up fast.

Mark turned and placed his arm around me. He shepherded me toward the door. I heard Springall lumber to his feet behind us. His attitude had undergone a further change. "Don't think I won't remember this, Drummond," he said. "You will pay for this, in the future, never fear. And you will feel the full force of my revenge when you expect it least."

I glanced at Springall as we left the room. He stood beside the table, his face vicious and unforgiving. He was now cold sober, possessed by the extent of his humiliation and his need for revenge.

Outside the farm I was taken with a fit of trembling. Mark held a clean kerchief to the cut on his face, stanching the flow of blood. We crossed the disreputable farmyard, and made our way to where both our horses were now tethered.

I do not know what I expected Mark's first words to me to be, but I was quite unprepared for his anger. "Is there no one to assist you?" he cried. "Have you no man in your family to accompany you, or to take your part? Have you always to face adverse circumstances alone?"

I was extremely put out by his words. Again he was criticizing Nicholas and the arrangements at Swanbrook Park. "Surely this is not the time for criticism," I said. "There are other things to do. Please allow me to attend to the cut on your face."

The blood was now flowing freely from the cruel wound on his cheekbone, falling on the front of his coat and on the shirt of his riding habit. I was wearing a white silk scarf around my neck. Withdrawing a twist of silk, I raised my arm to wipe the blood from his face. I was quite unprepared for what happened next.

Mark snatched me in his arms, and held me closely to him. He sank his lips on mine, kissing me with a closeness, a fire, an intensity I had not imagined could exist.

I felt his blood on my cheeks, the strength of his body, the fire and purpose of his inner being. And I was suddenly enveloped in a wild passion that caused my own blood to surge in my veins, to throb and scorch my skin with its fire. I broke from him and fell breathless against the trunk of a young tree.

Mark was similarly affected. There was a flush on his face. His eyes were fiery and his body was rigid with emotion. He took the scarf from my hands and applied its folds to his face. Again the wound was stanched but the deep fissure on his face was clear, with its crimson, gaping sides.

Suddenly, I was furiously angry. Looking back, I realize I was showing anger to hide my passion. Anger was a violent escape from the violent emotion that had assailed me in Mark's arms.

"How can you rescue me from one man's advances, only to force your own embrace upon me?" I cried.

Mark was taken aback. "Do you repay my rescue with insults?" he exclaimed. "Far more than one unwelcome embrace was to befall you, had I not arrived at the farmhouse in time."

"How can you kiss me, when you are already committed to another woman?"

Mark was astounded. "Which woman?" he queried. "What nonsense is this? Who is the woman of whom you speak?"

"Syriol Claverley."

"What causes you to throw these accusations at me?" he demanded.

"You were dining with her at the Fox and Hounds. I have heard that she left the Park to be available for you, and that you are already . . . lovers."

His face flushed a deep scarlet, but it was not the color of guilt; it was a sign of overwhelming anger. "You are grossly misinformed," he replied. "Norman Foster, the corn merchant, and his wife invited me to dine with them at the Fox on the night you mention. But when I arrived, I found a message from them that they could not attend.

"I seated myself at the center table, intending to dine alone. But Syriol entered the dining room and approached me, with the suggestion that we should dine together. Indeed, she seated herself at my table, uninvited, as if her suggestion had been accepted. I was at a loss. I could scarcely ask her to go.

"I realized that I was in a false position, dining with Syriol, when you entered the inn. But I had no means of clearing myself without being discourteous to Syriol. I trusted to see you later, to explain the circumstances. But that opportunity did not arise."

This news affected me profoundly. I felt bewilderment at the circumstances, as well as dismay at my error. But Mark was continuing. "Syriol is an acquaintance only. I would have thought a woman of your nature and perception would not so readily have believed otherwise. I assure you I have formed no easy alliance of the nature you describe. I am appalled that you should think me capable of this."

The sternness of his tone made me wince. He was furiously angry, furious at my mistrust of him and my misjudgment of his character.

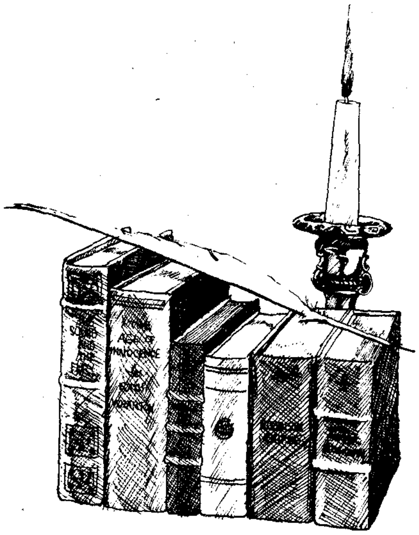
"I am most deeply sorry," I said. "May I ask for your forgiveness?"

At that moment I heard the sound of movement in the heavy brush nearby. At once I was thrown into a panic. Was this Springall returning, perhaps with an accomplice? I guessed that Mark was in no fit state to fight again. As for myself. . . . My heart thudded and my blood seemed to drain away from by limbs. In my consternation I faltered and almost fell. I raised my arm to regain my balance, and quite unintentionally my hand struck Mark a blow in the face.

I heard the oath and saw him lift the kerchief to his battered cheek. Blood spurted afresh from the newly-opened cut; the drops splattered his shoulder.

"You speak of forgiveness, yet have so little forgiveness to grant to others," he said bitterly. I opened my mouth to apologize, to explain that the blow from my hand was indeed accidental. But no words came. For in that moment we both heard the breaking of undergrowth, the sounds of horses' hooves, the voices of arriving men. Then the branches of the trees were parted abruptly and we heard the cry of command.

We both looked up to see, on a chestnut gelding, the tall and portly figure of a man. Squire Pollack had ridden to our aid.



"I saw Miss Emma enter Springall's house, from a distance, and yourself follow, Mark. I called my chargehands and followed, for I guessed what might occur.

"Are you seriously hurt? Shall I send my men to evict Springall? And, Miss Emma, you appear exhausted by events. Marshall, Dewhurst. Assist Miss Colville to mount her horse. Mark, follow me. I insist you both accompany me to Barleystone Grange. This way. Your wound needs instant attention. And Miss Emma is in no better shape."

Willing hands aided me; I was soon seated on Rosebud. Mark followed on Nimrod, and escorted by the Squire and his men, we left the environs of the Valley Holding, and headed across the valley toward Squire Pollock's home, Barleystone Grange.

Barleystone Grange was set back from the valley in a sheltered hollow of lush ground. It was approached through a winding drive of trees and shurbs; formal gardens were glimpsed on the south side of the house. The Grange stood foursquare in its park; a masterpiece of Georgian art. Yet it was no formal showplace, but a well loved and well-lived-in home. I was led indoors, and Mrs. Pollock bustled to meet me.

"This way, into the drawing room," she was saying to me. "Alice, bring a pitcher of hot water for Miss Colville. Reuben, send at once for Dr. Speight, to attend to Mark's face. Mark, please accompany Reuben upstairs and into the south room. I will be with you shortly. I can render elementary aid until the doctor arrives.

"And you will take tea," Mrs. Pollock was adding to me, as she expertly removed my riding jacket and began to sponge the blood from the fabric. "Evie, please take my place upstairs and attend to Mr. Drummond, until I can arrive. Alice, bring the tea at once."

At once I felt the tension begin to leave my body, and the unease began to lift from my mind. I took a cup of tea and accepted a slice of cake. Lulled by the comfort of the sofa and the kindly friendship of my hostess, I must have fallen into a brief doze. When I opened my eyes, I was startled to see Squire Pollock sitting beside me.

"Miss Colville," he said. His tone was formal but kindly. "I know it is no business of mine and you must forgive an old man for interfering. But I wish to speak to you on a matter which I deem to be of importance.

"Mark told me of his abortive visit to the Fox and Hounds when he expected to dine with Norman Foster and his wife. I thought little of the matter, until he recently mentioned the date of this broken appointment. Then I realized that this same evening—when Mr. Foster was reputed to have issued an invitation to dinner—was the same evening upon which Mr. and Mrs. Foster had a prior engagement. Indeed, they were both dining with me.

"I thought the matter curious, but not unlikely, Miss Colville. Until Mark mentioned to me that you also attended the Fox and Hounds, expecting to dine with Mr. Bardwell. But Mr. Bardwell sent an apology for his absence, also.

"Again I dismissed the matter as coincidence, and not my concern. But I had occasion to do legal business with Mr. Bardwell recently, and I happened to mention to him the strange circumstances of your visit to the Fox and Hounds. Mr. Bardwell assured me that he had at no time sent you an invitation, through Mr. Mackiness, to dine with him. He certainly had no knowledge of any such occasion.

"Norman Foster also assured me he had not invited Mark to the inn on any other occasion. So, it was clear to me that you were both enticed to the Fox and Hounds at the same time. And in both cases, upon false pretences.

"And now, Miss Colville," Squire Pollock continued, "an unmistakable question faces us both. Who was using both yourself and Mark for his own purposes? Why were you both deceived? Who wanted you to see Mark dining with Syriol Claverley, and Mark become estranged from you?"

I did not answer. I felt bereft of speech. I saw Mrs. Pollock pass the open arch of the drawing room, conducting Dr. Speight upstairs. Distantly, I heard Mark's voice. I closed my eyes.

Squire Pollock continued to speak to me, and when he had finished Alice brought in my sponged jacket which had been dried by the kitchen fire. I put on my coat, smoothed my habit, and stood up.

Mark, Mark, I longed to call up the stairs. *Please speak to me; call to me.* I thanked Squire and Mrs. Pollock for their trouble on my behalf. Mrs. Pollock kissed me kindly. Marshall had brought Rosebud round to the front door and would accompany me back to Swanbrook Park.

As we passed through the hall, I glanced up the stairway. I could hear voices quite plainly. But though Mark must have known that I was departing, he did not appear to say good-bye. He did not call my name or send a message of farewell. With heavy heart, I turned my face away.

Marshall attended me, and we began to ride down the valley road toward Swanbrook Park. My thoughts were serious and my conclusions clear.

It was obvious that Nicholas and Bevis Levett had schemed to bring a separation between Mark and myself. I remembered Squire Pollock's further words to me, as we had sat quietly side by side on the sofa:

"I have observed Nicholas Wetherby for some time now, and his course of action disturbs me. He is a loner. Although he appears gregarious, he is a man subject only to his own desires and inclinations. He knows no moral code, because he respects no one, and nothing—not even himself.

"We farmers have an old saying, my dear—if you plough a lone furrow, plough it straight. And this is what Nicholas has not done. I had thought for a long time that he would rise above the influences of his ancestry. But I am sorry to see that this is not the case."

"What can you mean, sir?" I asked the Squire.

"Nicholas's father, though high-born, was impoverished. He had a history of violence and finally killed a man in a drunken brawl. He was convicted, and deported overseas. His titles were forfeited to the crown. Nicholas's mother, distraught at this, lost her mind and was committed to a sanatorium in Paris. She escaped, and a woman who attempted to stop her taking her life was attacked. Both perished as they fell from the Pont Neuf into the Seine."

I felt, for the first time in my life, that I understood Nicholas more fully. He had borne with him, throughout his life, the terrible secrets of his beginnings. No wonder he had longed for the security of owning Swanbrook Park.

As Marshall and I approached the Park a wave of fear swept over me. How could I dare to return to the Park? What would befall me there? The marriage of Nicholas and myself was the culmination of Bevis and Nicholas's scheming. Did Bevis Levett then intend to buy Swanbrook Park and its estates? Was that why he had busied himself in my affairs and had engineered so drastically the course of events? Clearly Bevis was not entirely altruistic in his championship of Nicholas and myself.

Would the estate be sold to Bevis, and the money gambled away by Nicholas? What would be my own position when I had lost control of the Park and its estates?

Suddenly, another thought presented itself. How easy it would be, after our marriage, for me to have an accident. A slip down the long oak staircase; a fall from the carriage traveling at great speed. My life could be instantly taken. And Nicholas would become the sole owner of Swanbrook Park, without protest or bother. He would inherit everything as my widower.

I thanked Marshall and asked him to leave me, now that we were in the environs of the Park. He saluted with civility, and thanked me in turn for making his duties so pleasant.

I dreaded entering the house that had been my home for so long. I almost longed to escape from it. I had loved Swanbrook Park and adored the turret rooms. But now. . . . I had no champion, no one to turn to. Mark and I were now totally estranged.

I had known, when he did not call good-bye, nor send a message of farewell, that he was still angry with me. The fact that I had been so swift to misjudge him over the matter of his dining with Syriol, and the false report that he had been her lover, had proved unforgivable to him.

I urged Rosebud forward, knowing I must return. If only I had a woman friend, I thought. Someone in whom to confide; someone who saw my point of view. . . . Cecile! If only I could see Cecile. I pressed Rosebud onward, telling myself I would send a message into Wardcliffe, by Hoskins, asking Cecile to call. I was astonished, therefore, when I drew near the door and saw the trim and dainty figure of Nicholas's friend standing on the threshold of the house.

Cecile was scanning the horizon, looking this way and that. Clearly she was expecting me and was anxious to see me upon my return.

* * *

"Of course, you will take tea with me, Cecile," I said to her. But she refused with her usual politeness and charm.

"I have already taken tea with Crompton and Mrs. Partington, in

Mrs. Partington's room. But I wish to see you, for I bring you a message from my mistress."

We entered the drawing room, and it was then that Cecile saw my pale face, and the disarray of my riding habit. "What has happened? Please let me accompany you upstairs to your room. Your skirt is torn, your scarf is soiled with blood. I will attend to everything. Let me help you." And together, with her arm about my waist, we mounted the stairs to my room

Although it was now summertime, a small fire burned in the grate. I took off my soiled riding clothes, while telling Cecile what had occurred. Then she helped me into my long dress of mauve lawn, with its white fichu about the neck. I felt immediately better. Her attentions calmed and soothed me. I watched her trim figure as she flitted about the room. Cecile was looking better. There was a liveliness and sense of purpose about her movements which had not been there before.

"I am so happy," she said, turning to me, as if she felt my admiring scrutiny. "My mistress is so considerate, so honest and straightforward. She suffers greatly with her health, but I never hear her complain. And you will know of the new involvement in my life . . ." She blushed a little, and the color lit up her face. "William Crompton is my devoted friend, and has brought me great happiness and contentment."

"He is a fine person," I replied. "I cannot tell you how glad I am, because of your happiness, Cecile."

As for Crompton, he had almost visibly changed before my eyes. He had put on a bit more weight, gained confidence and, with this, showed a cheerfulness and optimism about life that cast its influence upon everyone at Swanbrook Park.

Cecile and I continued to chat, she telling me about the routine at Garford House, the home of the Bevis Levetts. Finally she said, "But I am forgetting the purpose of my visit. Mrs. Levett has asked me to request that you visit her.

"She says she has not had the pleasure of being formally introduced, but she begs you to forego this, in view of her poor health. She requests that you come and take tea with her. Would tomorrow be convenient? I trust that it will," Cecile finished, "for my mistress is very earnest in her desire to see you."

"Tomorrow is quite convenient," I said firmly. "And I am delighted to accept."

When Cecile had gone, Nicholas arrived. He looked upset and extremely put out.

"Springall was in the wrong," he cried. "I have heard what has occurred. He has left the Holding, did you know? He has quit our employ and taken refuge in Wardcliffe." Nicholas came close to me. "I cannot bear to think of you at risk in his presence. If any ill should befall you . . . I would rather die. I would rather the disaster should befall myself."

I looked at Nicholas with wondering eyes. How did he know so soon of the afternoon's events? He could only have heard of them from Springall himself. What was the link between Nicholas and Springall? I asked myself. I noticed that Nicholas did not suggest that Springall should be prosecuted for his misuse of the farm money, or his assault.

I noticed, too, that there was a new aspect about Nicholas. Before, he had been controlled, mannered, self-sufficient. But now he seemed almost wild, almost trembling with loss of control. It was as if he had reached some private decision and crisis, and knew there was no turning back.

"Do not go out tonight, Nicholas," I begged. I dreaded that he might go to Bevis Levett's. Some intuition was warning me of what he would find there. "Stay in with me. Let us sit together after dinner . . . and play bezique." Small inducement, I thought, to one of Nicholas's temperament and inclination.

He replied soberly. "There is nothing I would like better, but Bevis has a game tonight and I have promised to attend. Besides that, he wishes to see me on an urgent matter. We have important business to discuss."

I knew then that this evening at Bevis Levett's, Nicholas would be told the conditions for the cancellation of his debt.

"Dame Fortune must smile upon me soon, again," Nicholas said. "And events will present themselves through which my indebtedness will be discharged. Then I can come to you with clean hands and an eager heart."

Nicholas gripped my arms tightly in his hands. "I shall never let you go, Emma," he told me. "I will tear the world apart, rather than lose you. I have never wanted anything so much in all my life as I want to pay my debts, and come to you unencumbered, as you so rightly wish."

The day of my visit to Mrs. Levett, she lay propped up in a large four-poster bed, in a large, magnificently furnished room overlooking the rear gardens. My hostess was a woman approaching forty, with a sallow, lined face. Her dark hair was beautifully arranged, by Cecile, no doubt. White hair had encroached on the brown, just as fine lines had etched themselves around the dark eyes and well-shaped mouth. Mrs. Levett's gaze was searching, but friendly and concerned. I liked her instantly.

Cecile was present and made our introductions. It was clear at once that Cecile was highly regarded, and had made a place for herself in Mrs. Levett's life almost like that of a favorite niece or a daughter.

"I cannot tell you how kind Cecile has been to me," Mrs. Levett told me. "Her patience, her consideration and her common sense are outstanding. She has given me a new lease on life. Though truth to tell, I know in my heart that my time is now growing short."

I murmured words of disbelief, but Mrs. Levett smiled at me with a knowledge and conviction far better than my own. "Please order the tea, Cecile. Miss Colville and I will chat until you return."

When Cecile had gone, Elizabeth Levett said to me, "I believe you have met my husband, Bevis. I know he is a frequent visitor to Swanbrook Park, and a close friend of Nicholas

Wetherby. Bevis came to this town years ago, as a surveyor for a firm planning to build a mill. We met and fell in love. I married him, and my father took him in as a partner in the Victory Mill.

"The mill is mine, Miss Colville," Elizabeth Levett told me. "My father has been dead for some time. Bevis has, of course, gained control of everything. I do not begrudge him this," she affirmed. "I expected it. It is the law. But having gained the mill and the monies, I expected at least our happy marriage to continue. Now . . .

"He is indifferent to me," she said. "I know my illness grows progressively worse. I cannot entertain for him or appear as a social partner. My usefulness for him is over. But I find his callous rejection of me in my need very difficult to bear."

Cecile entered with a maid bearing the tray of tea. Over the rim of my cup I regarded my hostess. I guessed that she did not minimize the domestic situation in her life. She knew that her days were few, and she had the power to speak frankly, to face the truth, and to ask that others of her acquaintance should do so, too.

We continued to talk, and now that Cecile had returned the conversation became lighter, less personal. Yet I was baffled by the interview. What was the purpose of it? Why had Elizabeth Levett wished to see me? What had she in mind? She must have a greater scheme she was considering. I bade farewell to Elizabeth and Cecile, and promised to return at an early date to see my new friend. I returned home in a thoughtful mood.

On the afternoon of the following day, Cecile returned to see me.

She sat down and began to speak without preamble. "It was good of you to come to see my mistress yesterday. She appreciated it. She had wished desperately to see you, to talk to you. To see if you . . . I told her of your character but she wished to see for herself. She wished . . . ."

Cecile halted for breath. It was true then, what I had suspected yesterday, that Elizabeth had wished to evaluate me before she embarked on a course of action she was considering.

"The information sent to you from my mistress concerns Nicholas Wetherby and Bevis Levett," Cecile continued. "You will know of Nicholas's debt to Bevis, the money lost by gaming between these two. The sum, I am informed, was originally 27,000 pounds. But Nicholas has recently gambled relentlessly and has lost further money to Mr. Levett. His debt now stands at 32,000 pounds.

"He had no hope of clearing this debt by any means, until Mr. Levett told him that if he will agree to a proposition on behalf of Mr. Levett and the other millowners in the town, the debt will be entirely cancelled and wiped out. The proposition is—to ruin the Ludorum Mill and drive Mark Drummond from the town."

I sat quite motionless, watching Cecile's face. I guessed that this was only the beginning; there was more to come.

"Nicholas has therefore engaged a party of wreckers to come to Wardcliffe, and. . . ."

"Smash the mill and kill Mark," I said.

"I do not know the extent of the plot," Cecile replied. "Nor does my mistress. But as soon as she had learned of the intention of her husband and Nicholas, she longed to tell you. She has sent me now, to warn you. We both pray it will be in time."

I rose to my feet. Elizabeth Levett had eased the dreadful disillusionment and despair of her life with Bevis by this action. Perhaps her action was excusable in one who so soon faced death. But I did not have time to consider the moral aspects of the matter, now for I knew that valuable time had been gained by Cecile's coming to warn me and I knew that drastic events faced me.

I must warn Mark. I had known that almost instantly. I must go to him and tell him of the plot to wreck the mill and drive him from the town. Or worse. Even if he did not wish to see me, even if he refused to grant me a hearing, I must force myself into the Ludorum Mill, into Syone House, into Barleystone Grange, wherever he was. And I must do it speedily. At once.

I heard a footfall on the stairs. No one came up here, now. Who could it be? The door opened, and Nicholas came into the room. There was a smile upon his face. He appeared happy, almost jaunty.

He came toward me, his eyes shining. "I have come to you, Emma, to tell you that I have found a way to pay off my burdensome debt. I can soon come to you a free man."

He tried to take my hands in his, but I withdrew them from him. He looked at me questioningly. "I realize that matters have been difficult between us," he resumed. "That events have strained our engagement. That there have been differences of opinion and misunderstandings."

Again he tried to take my hands, again I refused him. "What is the matter, Emma?" he asked me. "Are you so unforgiving about the future? Can you not forget past errors and mistakes? I love you. Isn't that enough? To know of my love and devotion to you? Isn't that enough to bridge our differences, and to make ground for us to build our future life?"

"I find it difficult to believe in your love," I said somberly.

He shook his head, his color paled a little. "I guessed as much," he said. "The past haunts you. It is true that at first, perhaps, my feelings for you were not deep and sincere. But as time has gone on, Emma, I have come to love you with an intense and deeply-felt love. You are the love of my life, Emma, I know that. I shall never love any woman, as long as I live, as I now love you."

His intense and serious gaze was fixed on my face. I believed that he spoke the truth. I realized, with the force of a revelation, that Nicholas had truly come to care for me.

The tables were turned between us. I had loved him hopelessly and overwhelmingly only a short time ago, and he had been indifferent. Now in spite of his protestations of love, his words awoke no echoes within me.

"If you truly cared for my well-being," I said, "you would not contemplate the course you have undertaken to free yourself of debt. You would value my good opinion too highly to make yourself a party to violence and betrayal."

His expression changed: he looked at me challengingly. "To what do you refer?" he asked. Then, "Who has been talking to you?" I did not answer.

"Cecile," he said. A spasm of fury crossed his face. "That sly chit."

Nicholas came closer to me; he seemed to imprison me. "Don't you understand, Emma, it is the only way for me to discharge my debt? And why are you afraid of a little violence? It is the currency of the times. And as for Mark Drummond—he should be hounded out of Wardcliffe, and dispatched without ceremony. You cannot know how high feelings run against him in Wardcliffe. The other millowners fear and detest him. I shall be doing them and the town a favor by ridding the district of this man."

A red mist formed before my eyes; rage flooded my veins. "You are not fit to even speak of Mark Drummond."

A strange look came into Nicholas's eyes. He did not move from me. He still stood close, hemming me in against the window frame. "So, in spite of everything, you are still attracted to the millowner," he said. "My supposition was right at the beginning. From your first meeting you were affected by him. And now what is your feeling for him at this moment, Emma, my dear?"

I would not answer. He took my hands in his and dragged me to him. "Answer me," he cried. "I want to know the truth."

I decided I must play for time. Time was in so short a supply in my life. I said, "I fear what the wreckers will do to a defenseless man."

"The wreckers are skilled professionals," Nicholas answered.

And I knew that this was true. For to employ wreckers was to employ a band of ruthless and violent men, who traveled from town to town, wherever required, wreaking vengeance or ruining the plans of an adversary. When they arrived, they recruited local men to aid them. Local men who. . . . And then a terrible suspicion formed itself in my mind. "Springall," I cried. "The wreckers will be reinforced by Springall."

The memory of the drunken and violent man sprang to my mind. I saw him lurching toward Mark with the broken bottle in his hand; saw the two of them fight; the dreadful gaping wound on Mark's face where the jagged edges of the glass had penetrated.

"No!" I cried. "No, Nicholas. Do not let Springall attack Mark. I could not bear it. Springall will kill him. Mark will be taken unaware and be unable to defend himself. Nicholas, please. Spare Mark. Let Mark go."

In my agitation I had seized Nicholas's arm. He looked down at my hand as if it was a strange and unaccustomed object. "Calm yourself, dear Emma," he said mockingly. "The instructions are to rough Mark up a little, not to kill him. To injure him, so that he quits town with his tail between his legs. And he will want to go when he sees what the wreckers will do to the Ludorum Mill."

Anger coursed through me. But before I could speak, Nicholas resumed, "So, now, when the cards are down, yet another truth is revealed," he said. "Are you in love with Drummond, Emma? Has your fancy for him turned to love? Tell me. I want to know. It is the most important thing in my life to know."

I did not answer and Nicholas said, "You love him. I can see it in your eyes, read it in your face. In spite of all I have done, in spite of my yielding to Bevis's threats and blandishments so that I might come to you a free man, I find you love someone else. Again, my efforts have all been in vain."

I tried to be calm, to take my desperate, runaway feelings in hand. I realized that I must try to save Mark's life, for I was certain, in spite of Nicholas's protestations, that Mark's life would be lost in the course of this plan.

I took a deep breath, and with what I hoped was a steady voice said, "Nicholas, when I first inherited Swanbrook Park and the estate, it was on the very tip of my tongue. . . ." To offer you everything, I concluded to myself silently.

I remembered the scene in the library after the reading of the will. I remembered Mr. Bardwell's warning hand upon my arm, as if he knew of my inclination to offer Nicholas my patrimony. How much would have been spared us had I followed my prompting.

"Take Swanbrook Park, Nicholas," I said now. "I know you love it. It was your home before it was mine. Take the house, the money, the investments, the farms. Take everything. Only. . . ." are offering me your inheritance if I prayed.

Nicholas looked at me wonderingly. He put out his hand and raised my face to his. "So," he said quietly, "you are offering me your inheritance if I will spare the life of another man. How strange this is. What I have wanted all my life—Swanbrook Park. And now that it is offered to me, I cannot accept it.

"Don't you see, Emma, what your suggestion proves to me? It proves beyond doubt that you love Drummond."

I looked up at Nicholas's face and I knew that he spoke the truth. I knew that I loved Mark with an intensity I had never thought to experience.

If I never saw Mark again, if his rejection of me was complete and forever, still, my love for him would endure and not be altered. My love was changeless and would grow, not diminish, with time.

Nicholas was speaking to me and in his voice there was no triumph, only a kind of searing pain. "You know what you have just done, Emma, don't you? By your offer you have shown me that above and beyond my desire to own Swanbrook Park, I want the death of Mark Drummond. Because you love him. But he shall never have you, Emma. Never, If you will not marry me, neither shall he marry you. I will ruin him. Finish him. Drummond shall never possess you. Never."

Nicholas turned and almost ran to the door of the turret room. He seized the key from the lock and opened the door. Once outside, he turned the key in the lock and I heard it turn decisively. I was locked inside.

I stood alone in the center of the turret room. Everything was still. I listened, but there were no sounds from below. I ran to the door and pulled at the handle. It was securely locked.

I sped to the windows, but they were closed and barred. Even if I broke the glass I could gain no advantage, for there was a long drop of three stories to the ground below.

I stood alone again. The silence, the desertion, the isolation was oppressive. Memories of the past flooded back to me. I remembered Hugh picking me up once, when I was quite small, and holding me in his arms as he told me a story, a story of long ago. He had crossed to the wainscoting on the far side of the room, and he had shown me, as he talked. . . .

The priest's hole! The hidden passage that led outside the room, so that the forbidden cleric could pass to and fro on his prayerful occasions, undiscovered. I ran to the wainscoting, and began to press the panels with my hands. It was beneath a carved acanthus leaf that the wooden panel began to move: creakingly at first, then more silently. Gradually, the wall moved inward and a hidden door swung open. I could see another door on a single latch. I stepped into a tiny opening and pulled the handle of this door.

At first I thought I had not succeeded, for though the door opened, there was no access out of the room. The I remembered the tapestries that were on the other side of the wall. I pushed with all my might, so that the heavy Flemish canvases would move aside. As they did, I half crept, half crawled under the embroidered hangings and—escaped! I was free in the main body of the house. I sped down the stairs.

Nicholas had gone on ahead, I was sure, to Wardcliffe. I knew there was no time to lose. I must travel the valley road and follow him there. I saw no one in the house, but in the stableyard I was overjoyed to see Crompton. To my surprise he was backing the horses into the shafts of the carriage.

"Hoskins is off ill," he said. "Have you heard? There is to be an attack upon Mark Drummond and the Ludorum Mill, tonight. Mr. Nicholas has just told me. And I fear the consequences. Mr. Nicholas was distraught. He seemed almost out of his mind. There was an air of violence about him that frightened me," Crompton continued, all the while harnessing the horses. "I fear that he will forget himself and do injury to some innocent person . . . as he did to me. . . ."

Crompton stopped and the words suddenly tumbled out. "Springall," he said. "Now that my health has improved, my memory has returned. I can remember . . . it was Springall who attacked me in the stableyard, all those months ago. And Springall came later to see Mr. Nicholas, and I heard him demanding payment for what he had done."

"So it was you who left the key upon the blotter, so that I could see the ledger," I said to Crompton. The horses neighed. Crompton scrambled aboard the coach. "Wait for me," I cried. "I am coming with you."

Crompton whipped up the horses, so that they sped through the big gate. "That is true," Crompton said, raising his voice above the sound of the horses' hooves. "I wanted you to see the books. I wanted you to know the truth."

We turned into the valley road. When I saw it stretching before me, winding its long way to Wardcliffe, I knew that I had made my decision.

In this year of 1843, this decision and action was totally unorthodox. For a woman to reveal her love to the man before he had expressed his love to her was unthinkable. For a woman publicly to show her inner feelings to the world without justification was to court the pillory of mocking or

CAMEO LOVE SIGNS

by Phoebe Matthews

CAPRICORN DEC. 22-JAN. 19

When the clock chimes midnight and the New Year gaiety begins, you will have cause to celebrate, for 1981 lends increased understanding to your Capricorn sensitivity, and endears you to one who could be a comfort to you for many years. The cool January sun gives courage in your sign now. Take care that it doesn't chill your compassionate nature. After the 11th, flirtatious Venus may tempt you to trifle with the affections of a gentleman you could not truly love. Instead, use this new confidence to follow your wise intuition and discover the true value of a treasure that others have overlooked. The flickering gold of a fragile chain or a love locket matches your beguiling mood these winter days. *Romantic days: 5, 15, 26.*

AQUARIUS JAN. 20-FEB. 18

Reckless Mars plunges you into a mid-winter adventure, blinding your reason with the dazzle of reflected candleglow in a mirror. If you will postpone rash choices until after the 13th, Mercury wisdom could open your eyes and help you to guide your own destiny. Although January marks a time of new beginnings, do not let your generous Aquarius heart lead you into a romantic rendezvous that could endanger a tie with a past love. Be patient and the gentle sun will clear away the turmoil that confuses your affairs, bringing the harmony you so crave by month's end. 1981 could fill you with a new independence of spirit, drawing admirers towards you. Flame-orange flatters and reflects your new glow. *Romantic days: 7, 17, 31.*

PISCES FEB. 19-MAR. 20

Wily Venus tempts you into a dalliance with a gentleman who has treated you insolently in the past, drawing a veil over your soul-searching Pisces eyes and tricking you into believing his personality has changed this year. Beware and heed the advice of a concerned lady whose honest friendship has never been clouded by jealousy. She could help you avoid a heart-rending scandal involving an affair that begins on the 10th. Malicious Mars holds up a dark mirror, causing you to see only the troubles of the past unless you strive to calm your tumultuous emotions. Wear violet, its scent or color, for violet is the most sympathetic shade for your troubled heart. 1981 promises happy ideas and far horizons. *Romantic days: 11, 19, 24.*

ARIES MAR. 21-APR. 19

The bewitching moon continues to lure you away from your responsibilities, drawing you into a whirlwind of fleeting romances, each one as unsubstantial as frost patterns on a windowpane. Be cautious around the 27th or you could endanger the romance that has warmed your Aries soul for so long, losing sight of your true desires in love's tangled byways. Don't let a domineering gentleman dictate your New Year's resolutions, but rather, listen to the loving advice of a trustworthy friend. If you are feeling a bit let-down after the holidays, wrap yourself in the glowing, fire-reds that complement your Aries vivacity. 1981 could bring a very special, unexpected legacy. *Romantic days: 2, 24, 29.*

TAURUS APR. 20-MAY 20

A relationship that you hoped was the answer to your romantic dreams seems to be melting away under the New Year's sun. However, like the dormant crocus beneath the snow, this love could bloom again if you curb your Taurus tendency to play games with your lover's emotions. Meddling Uranus has touched your darling's heart with an unreasonable jealousy, and it will take all your natural Taurus tact and compassion to make him see you clearly as you are. After the 14th, magic Venus and a touch of amber in your costume combine to make you irresistible. The coming year promises an advantageous relationship, encouraged by your growing perception. *Romantic days: 2, 24, 29.*

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 20

January could leave you torn between an old love and a new. Generous Jupiter and arrogant Saturn duel over your romantic heart, bringing you ecstasy one minute and dark despair the next. Although the first days of the month seem calm, an emotional storm sweeps in after the 16th, and sets you fleeing from an old romance. As usual, your impulsive Gemini mind wants to break all ties immediately without attempting to understand your lover's troubles. Take care or you could cause an estrangement from one who truly cares for you. Although 1981 brings new relationships, you should use your newfound inner strengths to carefully judge these changes. The color of Gemini's jewel, the brilliant emerald, matches your sparkle now. *Romantic days: 4, 16, 30.*

disgrace. But I did not care. I had nailed my colors to the mast. The whole world would see that I loved Mark Drummond. I did not care about the mockery or humiliation to come.

Something blew against my face and I brushed the fragment away.

Again a gray morsel was flung against my face and I dodged my head, seeking to evade these small clusters, frail as butterflies' wings. One particle remained on my hand and I gazed at it with dismay. It was ash. Somewhere, ahead of us, something was burning.

I saw Crompton's expression change. He had also observed the ashes borne on the evening wind. He shook the reins, calling to the horses, speeding them on their way. We both knew, without words, that the Ludorum Mill had been set on fire.

On the horizon we saw the fingers of flames. We could see a blur of orange with an inner heart of crimson light. The blur increased, growing with life of its own. A scorching smell reached us—a dreadful, searing, choking. We coughed and the horses shied. Still we drove on.

I shall never forget our entry into Wardcliffe. It seemed that all the populace of men, women and children were upon the streets. The pavements and roads were thronged. We had difficulty getting through. The carriage, however, was recognized and we were given safe passage. Crompton reined the horses in the yard of an inn, as near as he could get to the scene of the fire. A stableman accepted the care of our horses, and led them to a stable. Both Crompton and I ran from the yard, pushing and fighting our way toward the Ludorum Mill.

We stood on the edge of the crowd, as near to the mill as we could get. From here, the heat washed over us like the waves of a carmine sea. The wreckers had started the fire at the rear of the mill, and the whole of the back premises were now engulfed in flames. The walls were still standing, but part of the roof had fallen in. The machinery, like giant iron beasts, were frozen into defiant life.

The noise of the flames, the crackle of the burning wood, the explosion of oil drums, the cries of desperate men rose on the air, making a battering-ram of sound. Many women had fainted, overcome by the intensity of the heat and noise. But I stood my ground and schooled myself to keep my senses. I did not yet know what I would be required to do.

In the vivid light, I saw men moving. Not wreckers, not assailants, but the workmen of the mill. Mark Drummond's employees were fighting to save their place of work; Mark's men were struggling to save the mill.

JANUARY 1981

CANCER

JUNE 21-JULY 22

You are attracted to a mysterious someone as though to a glittering jewel, blinding you to the truth that he is more glass than diamond. Although his charms increase around the 5th, you must not listen to your dazzled heart. Insist on controlling the situation with gentle firmness. If you do, Venus could bestow a true romantic gem by month's end and you will be free to take this precious gift. While wicked Mars tempts you towards hazardous emotional journeys, use all your Cancer resolve to turn away from destinations that you know can only bring tears. Wear the soft orange-golds of candle flames to match your glowing personality. 1981 will bring a tantalizing series of unusual infatuations. *Romantic days: 2, 18, 28.*

LEO

JULY 23-AUG. 22

Moon wanderlust fills your heart with a desire for new faces and far, exotic places but mischievous Saturn threatens to delay your journey with misplaced luggage and annoying changes. Curb your daydreams and use your vibrant Leo personality to help a loved one keep his courage through a sudden storm of troubles. Your kindness could be the beacon to guide him to calmer shores and win you his ardent admiration. If you wait until the 21st to start on a challenging new path, the jewel-bright stars will glitter across your future like the Milky Way, lighting your year with new friendships and romance to answer the cravings of your tender heart. Dark winter greens soothe you now. *Romantic days: 5, 10, 23.*

VIRGO

AUG. 23-SEPT. 22

During these cloudy winter days you tend to see your destiny in the mirror of your mind, the images darkened by recent sorrows. Try to curb your Virgo desire for perfection and look past these falsely reflected images. If you face the troubles of reality with your natural courage, sympathetic Venus will help you after the 11th to improve the situation. A sensitive, artistic gentleman could invest glamour into your life and add the sparkle that your flagging spirit needs. Flamboyant Mars gives renewed energy to match the beauty of Virgo's own gem, the diamond. Wear this most precious of jewels, either the real thing or one of the delightful imitations, knowing it cannot outshine your Virgo beauty. *Romantic days: 5, 10, 23.*

LIBRA

SEPT. 23-OCT. 23

In the first half of the month, bewitching Venus surrounds you with the glitter of a thousand daydreams, dazzling your heart as surely as a basket of jewels would bewilder your eyes, and tempting your imagination to avoid reality. If you resist the lure of these fantasies, frivolous Libra, Venus will lend her magic to help charm those you seek to entertain, rousing Mars passions in an enchanting gentleman you have just met. Guard your precious health around the 25th when an annoying illness could recur to interfere with your romantic plans. Pamper yourself, draping your mystic Libra beauty in the rich purple tones of the amethyst. 1981 favors you, promising either to increase your fortune or bring a happy journey. *Romantic days: 7, 20, 31.*

SCORPIO

OCT. 24-NOV. 21

While the diamond planets weave their jeweled patterns in the January skies, impulsive emotions confuse your sentimental heart. Your changing moods appear both whimsical and charming to others, tempting you to take advantage of your appeal. A buying spree, inspired by glamorous Venus, could leave you with a closetful of finery and a round of quarrels with your aggressive Mars lover. When problems arise around the 1st and 27th, do not turn inward or shut yourself away on dark winter evenings. Wear shimmering white to outshine the gloom, and seek cheerful friends with whom to share your Scorpio wit. 1981 promises an increase in your fortunes through unusual pursuits. *Romantic days: 10, 21, 28.*

SAGITTARIUS

NOV. 22-DEC. 21

Gentle Sagittarius, although you are usually as calm and reasonable as the blue jewel tones you wear so well, this month playful Venus tempts you into a foolish flirtation on the very first day of January (or was it a continuation of a giddy New Year's Eve?). It will be no use making resolutions to keep your heart in one piece if you insist on rushing off after every passionate promise or flickering memory. Soon you will be chasing daydreams that are as evasive as shadows in a mirror. Instead of losing your temper, which could cause a careless accident, use the long winter hours to increase your knowledge, even if that means curling up alone with a book rather than a new love. 1981 brings a blossoming of your romantic intuition. *Romantic days: 3, 12, 23.*

From somewhere, buckets had been obtained and these were being filled with water. A human chain passed the sloshing pails and water was being tossed into the burning pile. Women employees were also helping. They had soaked their shawls in water and bound them about their mouths. They were carrying drums and buckets, reaching up to the fire, straining and fighting to bring the cruel flames under control.

And then I saw Mark. He was standing at the top of the steps, in the front half of the mill. Here, the fire was not so intense; it was clearly hoped to stave the progress of the fire, to try to save this section of the building.

He was directing operations. His clothing was torn, his hair singed, his face bruised and blackened. I saw the cuts on his hand as he waved the human chain backward. Yet he stood on the top of the steps, indomitable, facing the scorching of the inferno. The Ludorum Mill burned before him but he and his employees still fought on.

I felt rather than saw a disturbance in the crowd behind me. I felt a violent movement, heard a voice, then other voices. I turned just in time to see an arm raised in the air, a hand take aim, a missile thrown. A huge stone sped through the air toward the figure of Mark silhouetted against the crimson sky. The stone struck him on the side of the head and he fell to the floor.

The mob which, strangely enough, was on the side of Mark's people and against the alien wreckers, surged forward with a hail of curses. I heard blows struck; a man fell howling to the ground. I dreaded to think what would be his fate underneath the heels fo the people he had offended. But Springall had met his deserts; I did not think he would trouble anyone again.

Mark was lying still and silent at the top of the steps on the threshold of the burning mill. Flames had now gained hold of the front half of the mill; the roof must soon fall, the walls would soon cave in. Mark would be killed if he was not moved. I knew then what I had to do.

I fought my way to the front of the crowd, to the very threshold of the steps to the mill. Here the heat was intense. I was drenched with ash, with splatters of oil, with the harsh and flying fibers. I dragged myself to the foot of the steps and gradually, one at a time, I began to climb upward toward the threshold where Mark lay. I felt the stone steps hot as a burning stove beneath my feet and my hands.

I could not move him. I had reached him but I had not the strength to pull him away. I knelt beside him and I dragged at his unconscious body with my hands, with the whole of my strength. I tried to push him toward the steps; the fichu of my dress dropped off my scalded flesh, my hair fell about my shoulders. I heard my desperate voice call out over the furnace of air. Yet still I could not move him and he lay motionless as death. Only a flicker of breath told me that he was still alive.

"I love you," I cried. I covered Mark with my skirt. I lay across his feet, so that the fire should reach me first, so that Mark should not be the first to die. "I adore you beyond life, beyond heaven, beyond death." I seized his hand and carried it to my lips. But his skin was like parchment, hot and dry. It seemed almost as if life had been scorched from his frame.

I looked and saw the roof begin to fall. I heard voices, nearer, close at hand. I glanced sideways and saw a tall figure with a wet white kerchief across his face. Long, strong arms seized me and dragged me off Mark and down the steps. I was bumped unceremoniously, yet dragged surely away from the conflagration.

I struggled. I fought. I battled to return to Mark. I could not bear to be saved if he was left to perish. But even as I fought off my rescuer, I saw another man had reached the unconscious Mark and was dragging him from the threshold, down the steps, into an area where the flames could not reach, and the roof could not fall.

The roof fell and a shower of sparks was flung upward like a fountain of spray. The timbers shattered, the walls caved in with a roar. The rest of the Ludorum Mill was sundered. Then, little by little, the raging fire was brought under control and began to die down.

Crompton had rescued me. His long legs had scaled the steps; his now strong arms had dragged me clear. But the man who had rescued Mark was to me a deep surprise. For it was Nicholas who had risked his own life beneath the caving roof to drag Mark to safety.

I was told later by Nicholas that he had intended to rescue me. He said that his love for me had prompted him to do this. But when he saw that Crompton had me safely within his grasp, he had taken it upon himself to save Mark's life. His motives were never explained to me and were never clear.

Did he decide to rescue Mark because he knew that I loved Mark, and he wished for my happiness? Had the flames of Nicholas's own internal dementia burned themselves out, and reason had then prevailed? Had he regretted the past, with its catalogue of errors and mistakes, and want to atone for his actions? I never knew. I only knew an overwhelming gratitude toward him, because he had saved the life of the man I loved.

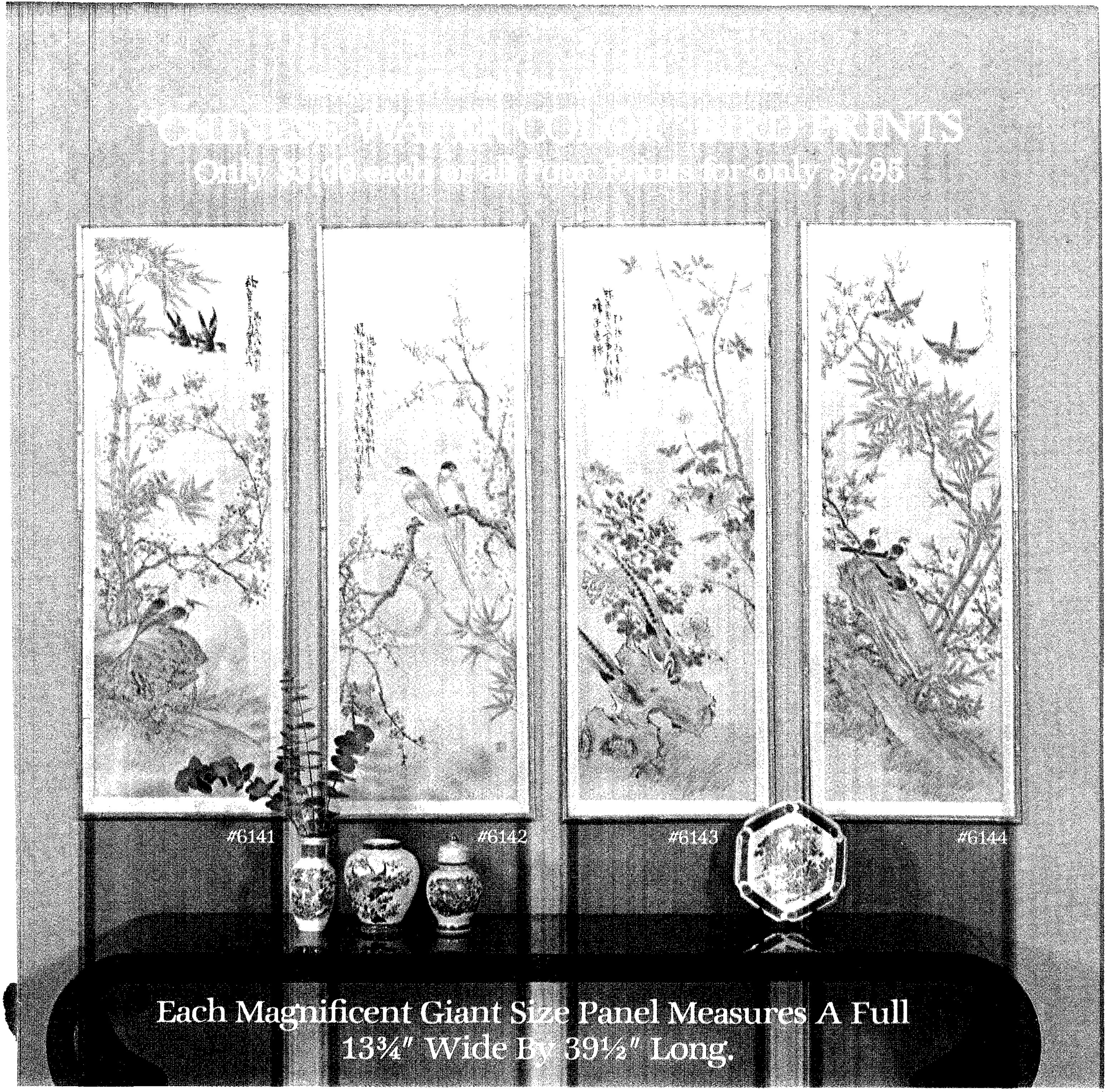
Mark and I were both taken to Syone House, and Mark was put to bed. Under Dr. Speight's skilled attentions he soon recovered consciousness. His first words took me by surprise.

"And I love you, too," he said, as if my confession of love made on the burning steps of the mill had just been uttered. "You do not love me more than I love you, Emma. You have been the lodestone of my life for so long. It is a relief to say the words. It is a miracle that you love me, too."

Our explanations for past misunderstandings were soon made. And within the strong yet tender circle of Mark's arms, I knew a happiness I had never thought to experience, a joy deeper than words can allow.

We were soon married. Upon our marriage Squire Pollock decided to retire and went to live in Dorset. Mark and I bought his lands and Barleystone Grange. The lovely Georgian house became our home and the home of our future family.

Mark and I felt surrounded by friends, yet our joy in one another was never diminished. We await now, the birth of our first child. A child of two farming folk at Barleystone Grange. A child of the open air, the fields, the flowers, the ripening corn. A child who shapes our love into his or her own bright and welcome form. A child who will share our love, yet in sharing will add also so much more. ❧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Account No.____________ Exp. Date________
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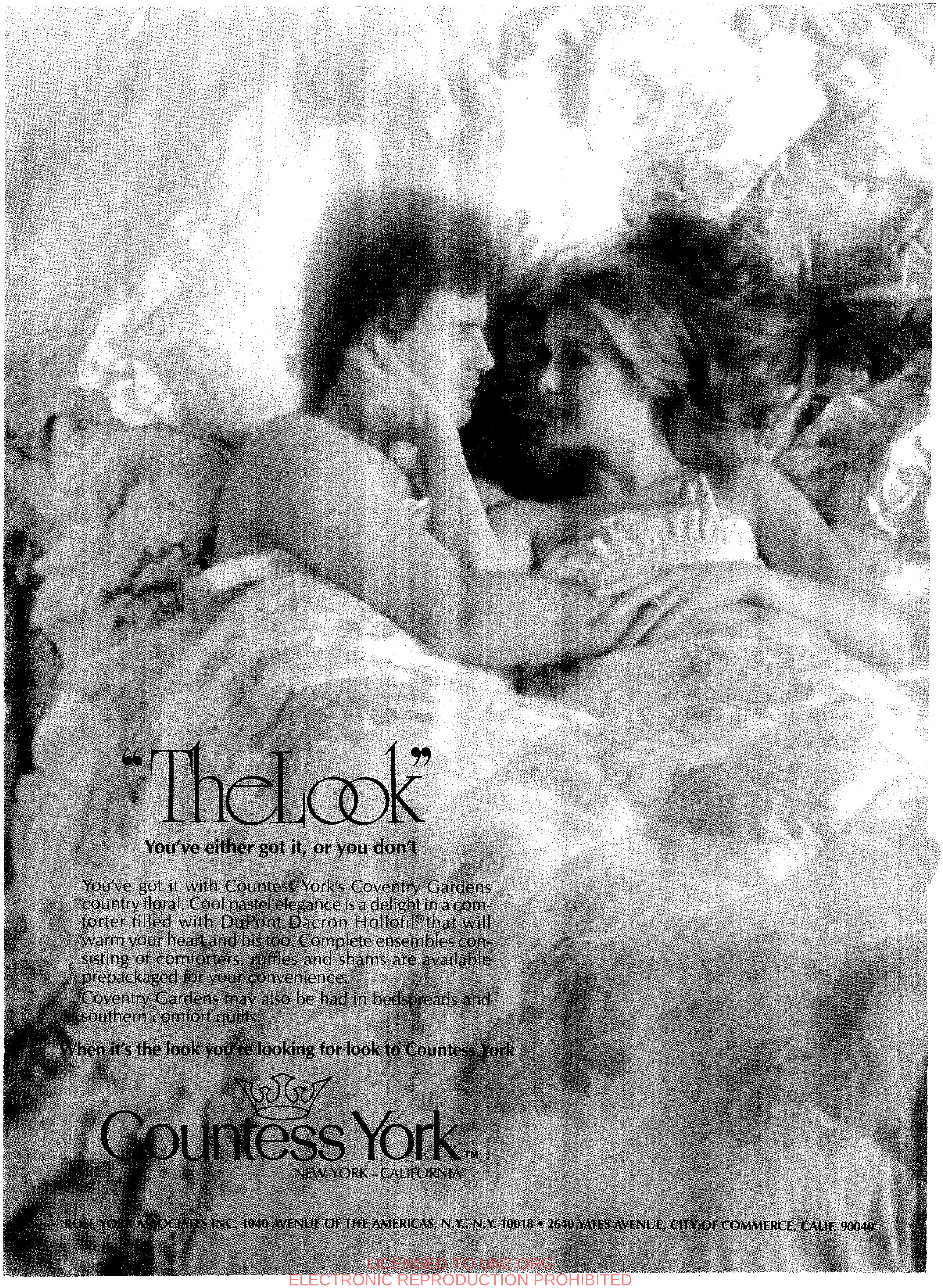

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